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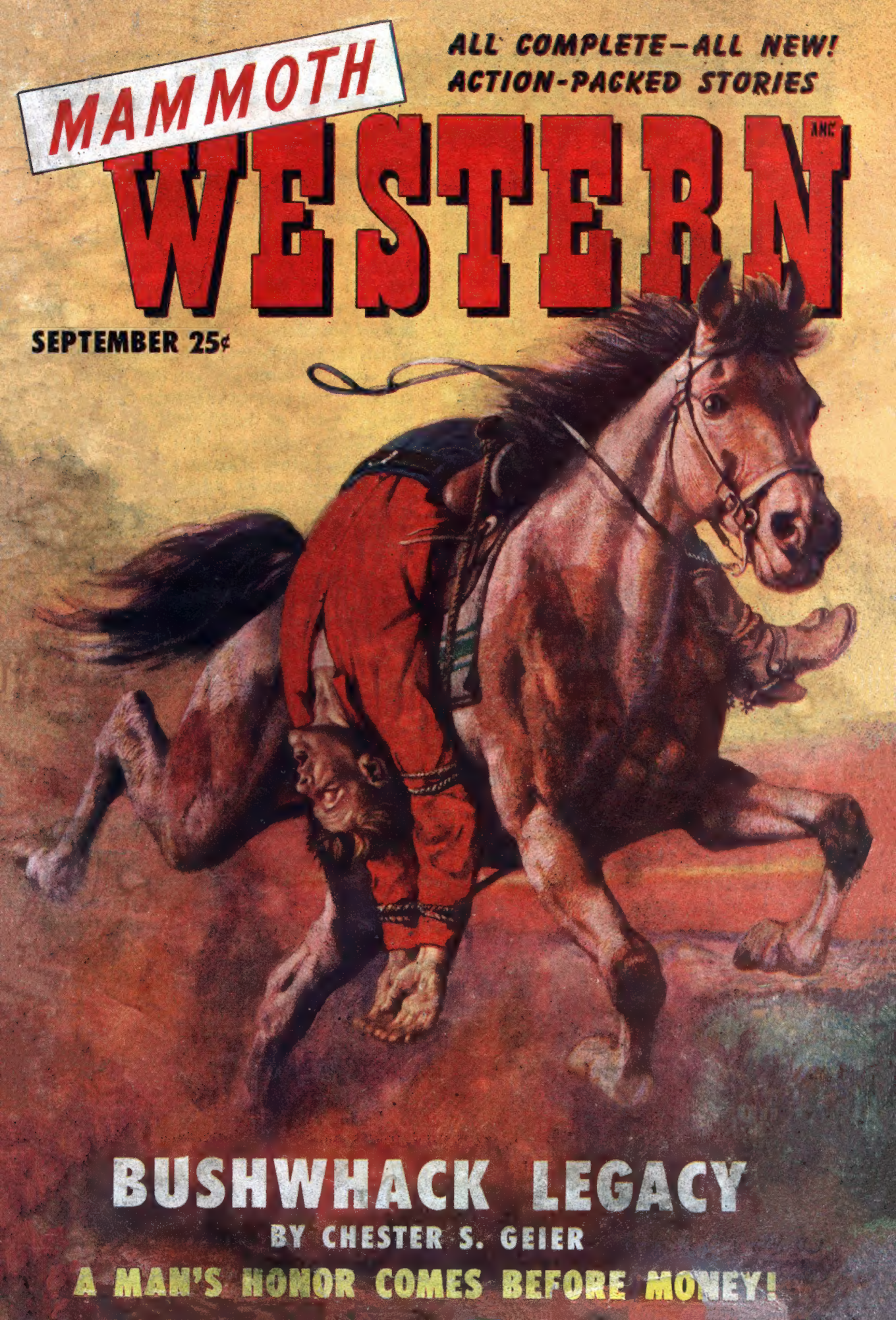

BUSHWHACK LEGACY

BY CHESTER S. GEIER

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MAMMOTH WESTERN

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Front cover painting by Walter H. Hinton, illustrating
a scene from "Bushwhack Legacy"

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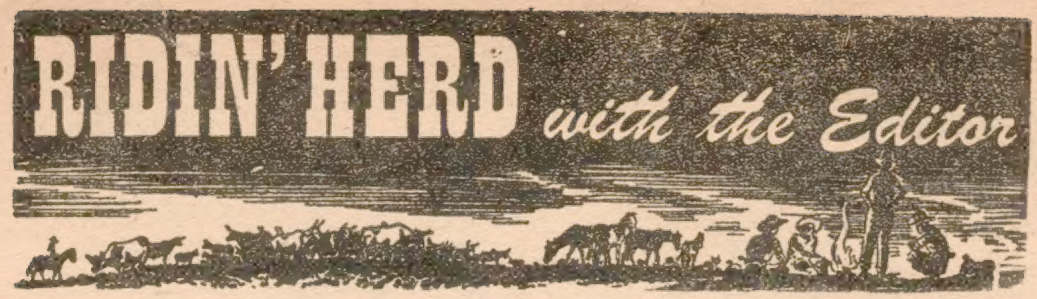


WE'VE GOT a real surprise for you loyal followers this month! An additional 16 pages of your favorite western magazine! How's that? And we're going to use those extra 16 pages to give you bigger and better stories and features each month.

OUR TABLE of contents was all set up for the September issue, and we were leaning back quite contentedly at peace with the world with the feeling of a job well done, and a deadline which would be met on time, for once, without the usual mad rush.

AND THEN, quite unexpectedly, we got the go-ahead sign from the front office on the page increase which we've been trying to get for you. So we made a wild dash to start the extra pages with this issue rather than wait until October. And that meant some fancy stepping...filling 16 more pages.

SO WE called on Alexander Blade and told him what we were up against. True to our past experience with him, he came through beautifully. Within two days, he walked into our office with a batch of typewritten sheets under one arm, his eyes all bleary, and handed us the 10,000 words of "The Silver Bullet".

WE THINK you'll find this one of the best western stories you ever read. It's full of suspense and surprises, and in the end... Well, how do you think the end could possibly work out for a man like Clint Farr who, with vengeance in his soul, was tracking down his wife who had left him for another man? Or so Clint thought... We think Alex deserves another notch in his gun for this one. It's really a dandy.

SHIVERS up our spine is what we got with our first look at Walter Hinton's cover. How about you? And Chet Geier does the same thing to us with his cover story, "Bushwhack Legacy". Dan Regan was looking for a man—a dirty gunner who had bushwhacked his best friend. And on the way, he meets Cyrus Garrett of the Rafter G. Cyrus had troubles—plenty of them. And before Dan knew it, Cyrus' troubles were his, too, even to the beauteous but difficult daughter of Cyrus. Amazing, the emotions that Chet can pack into a yarn. His stories really live and breathe.

ANOTHER of John Shevlin's memoirs, "The Case of the Dead Detective", starts on page 55. Any story that starts out: "I have been dead for thirty-six years...", is bound to be a humdinger. We couldn't believe we were reading right—but we were. This guy Shevlin stuck his neck out almost as often as he breathed. But he was lucky—and smart, too—and he lives to tell his tales.

FOR SOME real, fast-stepping action, with human emotions involved, Richard Brister's never let us down yet. And "See You In Hell!" is another good reason for his being a favorite of yours.

FRANCES DEEGAN is back again this month, with "The Soft Red Shoes". As far as we're concerned, we've never read a story quite like this one. We're not even sure whether we like it or not. But we do know that Doc Sample intrigued us as much as he terrorized the wide-open, bawdy town of Redman. Why don't you write and let us know what you think of this latest of Miss Deegan's efforts? And what do you think the red shoes were really made of? This story's a true one—believe it or not.

CLAUDINE GIBBS hated the desert with a bitter, burning hatred. She would commit any crime to be able to get away from it. How far should a girl go to escape? And how much should a man give up for the sake of the woman he loves? In "Flight From The Desert", H.A. DeRosso plays emotion, tension, and fury against each other, and comes up with the only ending possible in this kind of a situation.

IN ADDITION to the six stories mentioned above, there are four short stories and about 25 fillers which will keep you tied to the saddle of the September MAMMOTH WESTERN—so start reading—and don't forget to reserve your October issue now. Your old favorite, S.M. Tenneshaw, returns then with the cover story, "Hang Me...If You Can!" When a ranch foreman decides to go after a rustler, for both personal and business reasons, there's bound to be trouble.....LS

Prairie Tank Attack

★ By EVERRET KANE ★

IN 1874, THE Army was conducting a strong campaign against the Cheyennes. A detachment of the Eighth Cavalry ran into severe opposition and eventually found itself surrounded by more than a hundred yelling, ferocious Cheyenne warriors. The troop lay besieged for a while, and then managed to send for help. Two cavalry units were dispatched to their aid, but both failed to do anything but join the siege. The position looked hopeless.

It was then that Lieutenant Frank Baldwin, an officer of extraordinary skill and cunning, a double winner of the Congressional Medal of Honor and an ingenious fighter, got wind of the plight of the cavalry unit. He was at the time commanding a company or two of infantry, a few cavalrymen, and a column of supply wagons. He came upon the besieged cavalrymen near McClellan Creek, but he saw at once that an attack would be useless unless it could be delivered in the form of a powerful charge. Most of his troops, however, were infantry.

It was a case of improvising, and hurriedly. Badly outnumbered, a severe charge would enable Baldwin to break up the siege if he could find a way to mount his infantrymen. He did.

Hastily, he had a few of the supply wagons emptied, their covers ripped off and the soldiers piled into them. They crouched behind the sideboards of the wagons for protection. The wagons were drawn by sturdy Army mules.

Baldwin supervised the wagon-arranging, setting them in a single file with cavalrymen riding to either side. He ordered the bugler to sound the "charge", and tearing hell bent for election, the little column descended like an avenging angel upon the startled Cheyennes.

As the wagons tore down among the besieging Indians, the soldiers fired devastating volley after volley, loosing death and destruction fearsomely. The astounded Cheyennes hardly knew what to think when they saw this "armoured columan" sweeping down on them. Then, the realization came, and they scattered like chaff before the wind under the fierce fire of the soldiers. Lieutenant Baldwin had again saved the day.

So far as is known, this is the first occasion on which such an attack was conducted.

HARVEY'S HASH - HOUSES

★ By LEW KASPER ★

IT WAS the custom of the early railroaders during the eighties to refer to Fred Harvey's restaurants as "Harvey's Hash-Houses", but that was a misnomer if there ever was one, because these places were actually the introducers of a way of life, of a new culture in the hard and rugged West.

The story of Fred Harvey is now fairly well known, partially through favorable publicity, partially through the movies. But it is worth considering again. Fred Harvey was an English immigrant who knew the restaurant business. In St. Louis, he opened a restaurant which became quite famous and which did exceedingly well until the outbreak of the Civil War curtailed operations. Nothing daunted, Harvey took a job with a railroad as a mail clerk. During his travels, he noticed the extraordinarily poor eating facilities for the passengers. He suggested to the railroad the idea of a chain of restaurants. They didn't seem interested, so he offered the scheme to the now famous Santa Fe.

They jumped on the trick, and before very long there were dozens of the Harvey Houses at the way stations along the route of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe. They offered food which could be described as not only substantial, but tasty and appetizing, a rarity in the West up until then.

The passengers were fed at long tables and always with ample time to eat comfortably without hurrying. In fact, on occasion, trains were held up until some particularly slow passenger had finished his viands. The food was served piping hot, under relatively clean and sanitary conditions, and by attractive waitresses, many of whom became, later, the wives of settlers and railroad men. The Harvey chain was a phenomenal success. Because he made railroad travel so pleasant and consequently improved business, the railroad charged him no rent, hauled his supplies free, and thus left him able to beat any possible competitors, local or national. The system was a huge success.

A joke is told about the introduction of his rare, inch thick steaks. A cowhand seeing one for the first time and being unaccustomed to such fried foods, eyed the reddish meat and drawled, "I've seen many critters hurt worse'n that un, and they got well!"

But Harvey's Restaurants were no joke. They filled a long felt need, and in their way, influenced the course of things in the West, just as so many other apparently unrelated things have done.

Bushwhack Legacy

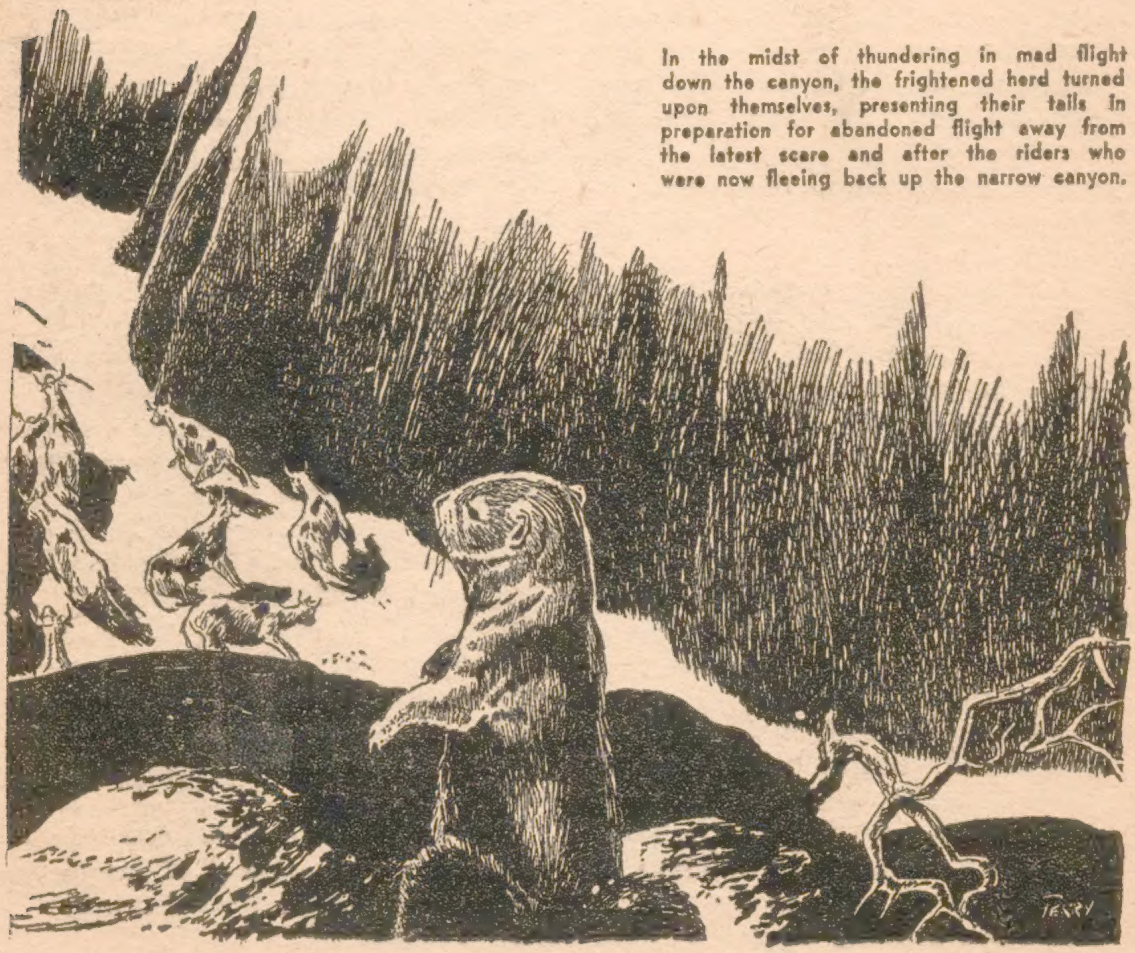
By Chester S. Geier

When Dan Regan picked up with Cyrus Garrett, he also took up the troubles of the Rafter G, and the possibility of ending up with a lot of bullet holes.

THE FLAT crash of a gun shattered the evening quiet that lay over the winding stretch of road. Jolted into an awareness of danger, Regan ducked in his saddle and his hand darted to the Navy Colt at his hip. He had it out and the trigger cocked, when he realized that the shot had been distant, coming from a direction well to his rear.

Again that flat crash of sound came, followed by a man's pained cry and the roar of another gun. Regan's thoughts leaped to the two men in the buckboard, whom he had met scant minutes before, back at the fork where the road he had been traveling toward Ortella had merged with the present one. He recalled that they had been suspicious of him, more than ordinarily suspicious, as though some threat hung over them. But when he had merely nodded and turned to continue on his way, they had smiled in quick relief and nodded back.

Regan still had a picture in his



In the midst of thundering in mad flight down the canyon, the frightened herd turned upon themselves, presenting their tails in preparation for abandoned flight away from the latest scare and after the riders who were now fleeing back up the narrow canyon.

mind of the older of the two men, straight and white-haired, his pleasant features crinkling in friendly fashion. For some reason the picture had remained with him—perhaps because it was the picture of a man he instinctively liked and trusted. This man had been expecting trouble, and trouble had appeared, it seemed.

Regan told himself it was none of his business. He had a certain matter of his own to occupy him in Ortella. But he couldn't remove the picture of the elderly man from his mind.

Back up the road, the sound of shots came again. Sudden decision tightening the lines of his weathered, spare face, Regan wheeled his mount and urged it into a swift gallop.

He reached the fork, passing the road down which he had originally come and continuing along the one taken by the buckboard. The road curved and then climbed a long slope. At the crest Regan saw a dip ahead, and at the bottom of this, almost in deepening shadows, he glimpsed the buckboard.

One of the two men who had been riding in it was now sprawled grotesquely over the seat. The other—the white-haired man—was crouched behind the conveyance, sending shots at a point on the ridge to Regan's right.

Regan sent his horse in that direction. He leaned forward in his saddle, and with his gray eyes narrowed in a squint against the gathering darkness, watched for the flash of a shot along the ridge. It came. He marked the location carefully, then dismounted, removing his carbine from its saddle scabbard. He began working his way through the brush along the ridge, moving toward the spot where he had seen the flash.

He was crossing a patch of open ground, when a man with a rifle appeared from behind a clump of brush at the far end. The other was peering toward the buckboard down on the road below, evidently planning to make a flank attack. The firing further back along the ridge continued, indicating that two men, or possibly more, were connected with the ambush.

Regan stopped and jerked his carbine to his shoulder. Almost at the same time, the other man became aware of Regan's presence. He was little more than a dark shape in the dusk, his head and shoulders outlined against the fading sky. He gasped and moved explosively, whirling to leap back into the shelter of the brush.

Regan fired, but knew that he had missed. He pumped another shell into the chamber of the carbine, then aimed in the general direction of the sounds made by the other's flight and fired again. It seemed another wasted shot, though Regan had not expected to hit his target. He had merely wanted to serve notice that he meant business.

RUNNING across the clearing, Regan slipped into the brush at the opposite end, following his intended victim. After a moment, he stopped, with the realization that he had betrayed his own position. And even as he realized this, a gun roared somewhere ahead of him and a leaden finger of death poked a hole through the brush a few feet to his left.

He dodged to one side, crouched and listened. He heard the other moving away again. Carefully, remembering the man's companion somewhere further back along the ridge, he resumed pursuit.

Then a voice lifted in a call and was answered. A murmur of speech followed, but only snatches of it were clear to Regan.

"...did that shooting?"

"...jasper horning in on our play...after me."

A muttered curse. "...high-tail it out of here..."

Shortly, Regan's straining ears brought him the sounds of men running along the ridge. They seemed to be moving toward the side opposite the road.

Crossing in that direction, he peered into the dusky shadows along the slope. The darker shapes of two men were hurrying downward, toward the bottom. He aimed his carbine and sent a shot after them, then dropped flat and waited.

There was a moment of silence. Abruptly, shots roared, and once more leaden fingers poked holes through the brush around Regan. None came close, however, and his lips twisted in a faint grin of derision.

Running footsteps again, and the clatter of stones. Somewhere at the bottom of the slope, hoofs thudded, rose to a steady drumming, and then began to fade with distance.

Straightening, Regan turned and trotted back to where he had left his horse. He mounted and sent the animal down the ridge and in the direction of the buckboard.

"Who is it?" a voice demanded huskily as he approached. "If this is a trick—"

"No trick," Regan called back. "I'm the gent you met at the fork. Remember? I heard the shooting and sort of spooked the snakes who were trying to drygulch you."

"Seemed like somebody else was sitting in on the deal, but I wasn't sure," the other returned. "Figured it might be a trick."

Regan was close now. He saw that the white-haired man was clinging weakly to the buckboard. Dismounting, he hurried forward.

"Hit bad?" he asked.

THE OLDSTER nodded gravely. "Reckon so. Got two bullets in me where they ain't calculated to do a man any good." He shrugged. "Time I was cashing in, anyhow. But I owe you a vote of thanks, son. You took some chances up there... My name's Garrett—Cyrus Garrett, of the Rafter G."

"Mine's Dan Regan." As he spoke, Regan's searching eyes settled upon the dark wetness which was spreading over Garrett's flannel shirt. "You need to be taking it easy from here on," he said. "Better let me give you a hand."

"I hate to put you out, son. Seems to me you've gone through enough trouble already."

"Where I come from, it isn't trouble to help a man who needs it," Regan returned quietly. He slid an arm under Garrett's shoulders and helped him to a sitting position at the rear of the buckboard. Then, using a clean spare shirt taken from his warbag, Regan applied a makeshift bandage to the other's wounds.

"Bottle of whiskey in there," Garrett said at last, indicating a box of supplies on the buckboard. "I could do with a nip."

Regan rummaged through the box until he found the bottle. Garrett took a long swallow, then passed the bottle back. Regan tilted it briefly and returned it to the box. He turned his attention to the man slumped in death.

"That was Gus Weckler, my foreman," Garrett said softly. "He stopped the first slugs. Funny thing, too. I had some business in Ortella, and Gus was plumb set on going along. He had an idea somebody might come gunning after me. Said I needed protection."

"Do you know who those drygulchers might have been?" Regan asked.

"A couple of Abe Stroud's hardcases, most likely."

"Who's Abe Stroud?"

"He owns the Coiled S. One of the biggest spreads in these parts. But that ain't enough for Stroud. Besides,

his water's been drying up, and he's in a tough spot with all the steers he has. He's been after me to sell him the Rafter G. What he wants is the stream at the north end of the ranch. I told Stroud I wasn't selling." Garrett took a deep breath and was silent for a moment. It was evident that his wounds were taking serious toll of his strength. He spoke with growing difficulty.

"Stroud ain't the kind who takes no for an answer. He warned me I was asking for trouble. He has a crowd of gunswifts working for him, and the sheriff in Ortella is his man, but I didn't think he'd take to drygulching. Just thought he'd put a lot of pressure on me, so as to make me sell the ranch."

REGAN LED his horse to the side of the buckboard and began the grisly tasks of lashing Weckler's body to the saddle. Then he tied the animal's reins to the rear of the conveyance and returned to Garrett.

"I guess I ought to take you straight to the doctor in Ortella."

"Reckon it's too late for that, son," Garrett said matter-of-factly. "I can feel the end kind of creeping up on me. Anyhow, the ranch is closer."

Regan hesitated, then climbed up to the seat of the buckboard and gathered in the reins. It was quite dark now, but Garrett supplied directions by means of landmarks which were not difficult to find.

After a while, as the buckboard rolled toward its destination, Garrett fell silent. Sensing in his silence the possibility of death, Regan began to worry. Presently he turned in his seat, peering at the huddled dark shape behind him.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Uh...reckon I am, son." The old man's voice was perceptibly weaker. "Just been doing a mite of thinking. The Rafter G is a nice spread. I spent over twenty years building it up, and I hate to think something might happen to it after I'm gone. A woman doesn't know how to run a ranch. And a woman wouldn't be able to stand up to Stroud."

Regan was puzzled. "A woman?"

"My daughter, Andrea," Garrett said. "Mighty attractive girl. But she's changed a lot since she came back from that school in the East. Has all sorts of high-falutin' ideas now. Like wiping your mouth on a napkin when you eat and not walking around the house in your stockings. Maybe she's right, but I reckon a man should live the way he pleases. Especially an old dog that can't learn new tricks." Garrett breathed heavily and was silent for a time. Then he went on.

"What makes things worse, Andrea is fixing to marry this Eastern dude, Darcy—Claude Darcy. Mr. Darcy doesn't know anything about running a ranch, either. And most likely he'd pass out if Stroud or one of his hardcases pointed a gun at him. Mr. Darcy has a lot of fancy manners. An expert with a napkin, Mr. Darcy is, and he wouldn't think of walking around the house in his stockings. But fancy manners don't mean anything in this country."

"I guess that's right," Regan said.

GARRETT breathed heavily again. "Andrea met this Darcy fellow while she was in the East. He came to the ranch for a visit, and seems to me it's getting to be a mighty long visit. According to what Andrea says, Mr. Darcy comes from high-class folks and has a lot of money. But I ain't seen him spending much. I think he's after the ranch, plain and simple. If he married Andrea, most likely he'd sell out to Stroud first thing, and then light out back East with the money. Hate to have that happen.

I put plenty of sweat into the Rafter G. Want it left in good hands..."

Garrett's labored voice faded and silence closed down once more, an uneasy silence, broken only by the rhythmic thudding of hoofs and the creaking of the buckboard. The road climbed and descended and turned. Then the hills were gone. Level country appeared, stretching off into the darkness on both sides of the road. Off to the right, not far distant, Regan glimpsed the lighted windows of a group of ranch buildings. He wondered at the queer foreboding that rose in him.

Garrett said abruptly, "Stranger to these parts, ain't you, Dan Regan?"

"Yes."

"Looking for a job?"

"Looking for a man, Mr. Garrett. A two-legged polecat who shot one of my best friends back in Elm Crossing. I got word that he had relatives in Ortella and would be heading this way."

"You have the look of a man who's been around cattle," Garrett went on. "Have any experience running a ranch?"

"Managed one for the Triple O Syndicate back in Elm Crossing."

"I've heard of that outfit. If you're running one of their spreads, it means what you don't know about ranching could be stuffed in a bug's ear."

There was an evident satisfaction in the old man's thinning voice, and Regan felt a growing bewilderment. He sensed somehow that there was a purpose to Garrett's questions, but it was obscure. Or perhaps his mind refused to accept the suspicion deep within him.

Garrett spoke again. His tone had a sudden, odd strength. "Dan Regan, stop the buckboard."

Regan pulled at the reins. "What is it? Are you—?" He bit the rest off and stared at Garrett, feeling a sharpness in his chest.

Garrett said, "With Stroud at one end and Darcy at the other, I've been wishing I had a son. And now, sudden-like, it's come to me that maybe I've found one. How'd you like to be my son, Dan Regan? In a way of speaking, I mean."

"It would be an honor, sir, but I don't see—"

"My rope is played out, Dan Regan. I need somebody to take over the Rafter G....somebody who'll keep it out of the hands of men like Stroud and Darcy, and who'll carry on the work I put into it. You know ranching. And from the way you went after those drygulchers back up the road, you know how to fight.... I'm thinking of giving you my ranch. Do you want it, Dan Regan?"

SLOWLY, Regan fingered the makings from his jacket pocket and rolled a cigarette. "That's a mighty generous offer, sir. A man could hardly say no. But seems to me it wouldn't be fair to your daughter."

"It's like I said," Garrett returned. "With Stroud putting on pressure, Andrea would lose the ranch. Or maybe she'd marry Darcy, and Darcy would sell out. I can't take that chance. I'd rather turn the ranch over to somebody who knows how to run it, and who would keep Stroud from getting it."

"Anyhow, I'll see that Andrea is taken care of. She'll get a steady income from the ranch, and in case something happens to you, the Rafter G will go to her. But I'm hoping that nothing will. Matter of fact, I'm even hoping that the Rafter G will stay in the family, sort of. You're a well set up young fellow, Dan Regan. Good-looking, too. Might be you'll show Andrea what a real man is like and make her forget Darcy."

Regan coughed on the smoke from his cigarette. "That's taking in a lot of territory, sir."

"Maybe so. Lots of things are possible." The odd strength was gone from Garrett's voice, and he continued speaking with an effort. "As for my offer being generous, don't make no mistake about it. I'm counting on you to find the low-down coyotes who shot up me and Gus Weckler. And you'll have to fight Stroud and his hardcases. And I reckon Andrea and Darcy will try to make things hot for you. All the way around, you'll have plenty of trouble on your hands. . . I'm not giving you a gift, Dan Regan. I'm giving you a load of trouble. Do you want it?"

Regan smiled thoughtfully in the darkness. "Yes," he said.

"All right," Garrett said. "That's finished. Now let's go home. . . .son."

Regan started the buckboard moving toward the lighted ranch buildings again, and a short time later he drew up to a stop before the steps of the main structure. Several men were approaching from what seemed to be the bunkhouse, and as Regan jumped to the ground, the door of the main building opened. Two figures appeared on the porch, the figures of a man and a girl, silhouetted in the light from within the room beyond. Evidently, the arrival of the buckboard had been heard. And evidently it had been awaited, as though everyone at the ranch had sensed in its lateness a hint of disaster. Sight of Regan's horse, with its limp burden, must have crystallized every suspicion into abrupt certainty.

AS REGAN strode toward the rear of the buckboard, the girl hurried down the steps and ran toward him.

"What's the matter?" she asked tensely. "What's happened?"

Regan touched the brim of his dusty hat. "Miss Garrett?"

"Yes. But what—"

"Your father has been wounded, miss. It was an ambush. Gus Weckler, there, is dead." Briefly, Regan described the sequence in which the events had occurred. Before he finished speaking, the girl hurried around to the motionless figure on the buckboard.

Garrett seemed to have lapsed into unconsciousness. For an instant, Regan thought that the old rancher had died. He knew that the effort of talking had been a severe drain on the other's strength. But when he felt for Garrett's heart, he found it still beating, though weakly.

He turned to the silent group of punchers, who were watching. "I'd be obliged if one of you would give me a hand, here. And I'll need someone else to ride into town for the doctor."

One of the men quickly stepped forward to assist Regan, while two others ran toward the corral, somewhere in the darkness. Garrett was carried into the ranch house, Andrea leading the way to one of the bedrooms. With Garrett placed in a comfortable position on the bed, Regan stepped back and took off his hat. He gazed at the girl as she bent over the bed, seeing her in direct light for the first time.

He remembered Garrett having described her as an attractive girl. That should have prepared him. But looking at her now, he felt a sharp surprise and a touch of something that might have been awe.

Andrea Garrett was beautiful in a way he had not often seen, for her beauty was emphasized by unmistakeable evidences of refinement and style. In a flowered, full-skirted dress, she was slim and dainty, yet the rounded lines of her figure

showed maturity and strength. Her hair was as black as new tar, curling softly about the gentle oval of her face. Her eyes were hidden now, but Regan had caught a glimpse of them and knew they were a deep purple, long-lashed and direct. Her lips were full and had the redness of ripe berries, with a curve to them that told of a nature at once warmly sympathetic and proud and willful.

She straightened and glanced at him, as though having felt his eyes on her. He tried to meet her gaze easily, impersonally, but somehow he felt shaken and unsteadied. He was suddenly aware of his rough clothing, wrinkled and travel-stained, of the reddish whiskers shadowing his angular jaws, and he wished he had known it would be like this and had had time to tidy up.

THE GIRL was the first to look away. "I...I had better get some hot water and bandages," she said. She turned and hurried from the room.

That left Regan with the man who was obviously Claude Darcy. The puncher who had helped Regan carry Garrett into the house had quietly left the room a moment before.

Darcy was a slender man, with effeminate features and shining, light hair brushed carefully over his narrow head. A thin, dandyish mustache helped to conceal the petulant cast of his full lips. He was immaculately dressed in a tweed coat, whipcord riding breeches, and glossy English-style boots.

He was gazing at the figure in the bed with a sly speculation in his pale eyes. Now, becoming aware that he had been left alone with Regan, he turned with raised eyebrows. "May I ask what you're waiting for?"

Regan stiffened slightly. "Why, I was sort of expecting to help a little."

"I think you've already helped enough," Darcy returned. His tone held an odd note of annoyance. "Miss Garrett and I will be able to handle the situation from this point on."

Regan said quietly, "Mr. Garrett might have something to say about it when he comes around. I think it would be a good idea to wait and ask him."

Darcy's full lips tightened. His gaze swept over Regan's dusty clothes, and contempt appeared in his face. "If you want a handout, I suppose you'll be able to get it at the bunkhouse. Or perhaps it's money you're after. A man in your condition would want—"

Darcy broke off, staring at Regan's face. With a startled, tense expression, he moistened his lips.

Icy fury glittered in Regan's eyes. He spoke with a softness that was yet biting and emphatic.

"If you weren't just a dude with a swelled head and bad manners, you'd know that people in these parts don't ask anything for their help. Garrett has told me about you, Darcy, and it appears you have to be excused for words that would earn a Westerner a mouthful of broken teeth. But you'd better learn some sociability, because this is all the excusing I intend to do."

DARCY DREW himself up. He surveyed Regan's clothes again, then with an air of abused dignity stalked from the room.

Regan remained motionless, while the harsh lines slowly left his face. He moved his shoulders in a shrug, a man dismissing something unpleasant from his mind, and glanced at the figure in the bed.

Purpose settled over him. He tossed his hat to a convenient chair, stripped off his leather jacket, and rolled the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbows.

He looked at the palms of his hands and then around the room. He did not see what he was looking for, and after a moment he went to the doorway and out into the hall beyond.

A mingling of odors and sounds from a point nearby indicated the location of the kitchen. Regan strode in that direction. As he approached the door, he stopped at the sound of a voice, Darcy's voice, low but vehement.

"....man's dangerous, I tell you. Why, he actually threatened me!"

Then Andrea's voice sounded. "I thought he was a rather rough-looking person. As soon as it is possible, I'll speak to father about him. No doubt this cowboy, or whoever he is, feels that we're obligated to him for his help. Father will settle that and send him on his way."

"Well, he had better leave soon," Darcy said grimly. "Else I'm liable to forget I'm a gentleman and trounce him within an inch of his life."

The girl spoke with a soft insistence. "Please, Claude, don't do anything rash. This cowboy is much bigger than you are. You might get hurt."

"Don't worry about me, Andrea. I can take care of myself. Brains are always more important than mere brawn, you know."

Regan grinned faintly. Then, straightening his face, he strode the remaining distance into the kitchen.

Darcy and the girl stood close together beside a table. Darcy was straight and stern, a picture of resolute courage, and the girl's hand was raised to pat his cheek as though in approval. At Regan's entrance, both whirled to stare at him in a mixture of dismay and guilt.

He glanced down at his calloused palms and said mildly, "I was looking for a place where I could wash up a bit, Miss Garrett. Seeing as how I'm going to give you a hand with your father, I figured it ought to be a clean one."

SHE TOOK her lower lip between her teeth and looked sidewise at Darcy. Then her lips moved in a small, strained smile. "Really, it won't be necessary for you to help. I deeply appreciate what you've done, and I'd hate to put you to any further trouble."

"No touble at all," Regan said. "I'll be glad to do anything I can."

The smile vanished. The small chin set and the violet eyes glinted. "Please. I regard this as a family matter and, frankly, I feel that you are intruding."

Regan's own face hardened. "Let's understand each other, Miss Garrett. I'm sorry you feel I'm forcing myself on you, but the fact is, I have a very good reason for sticking around. Your father wanted my help in a certain matter. I agree with him in a lot of ways, and I want to see to it that things pan out the way he plans. If he wants me to leave, I'll go without a fuss—but it's for him to say."

Darcy snapped, "Don't talk to Andrea like that, you...you tramp!"

Regan looked at the other. He said gravely, "I've already spoken to you about your manners, my friend. The next time, I'll just give you the chance to trounce me. Or maybe you don't care to wait."

"Perhaps not," Darcy returned in a cool tone. "But I shall have to inform you that I consider it beneath my dignity to have to come into actual physical contact with a man of your caliber."

"If you want to wait that long, I could get a bath and a shave," Regan offered. "And maybe I could get myself some fancy dude britches and riding boots like you've got on. As for

fighting like a gentleman, I guess I don't know how, but I'll make up for it by tying one hand behind my back."

Regan glanced at the girl. Her violet eyes met his briefly, and in that instant he thought he detected a far, stifled brightness in their depths that looked suspiciously like laughter.

Darcy flushed. "If it weren't that I am a guest of Miss Garrett, I would be delighted to take matters into my own hands."

THE GIRL touched his arm quickly. "Claude, please! Let's not make the situation more unpleasant than it already is."

"Of course, Andrea." Darcy looked bleakly amenable.

Regan examined his nands intently, and glancing at him, Andrea tightened her lips and went to the stove. She took a steaming kettle from the hot surface and half filled a wash basin at the sink. She added cold water from the attached pump, then laid out a bar of soap and a towel, which she took from a cabinet nearby.

Throughout the proceedings, Regan watched her with admiring eyes, a faint grin at his lips. Her movements were quick with anger and impatience, yet there was a supple grace to them that was nice to see. And her exertions heightened the soft color in her face, lending it an added loveliness. Occasionally, she brushed a shining lock of black hair from her eyes with an almost child-like carelessness and abstraction.

Finally, she returned to the table and gathered up the wash basin which she had placed there some time before. In it were a couple of bottles, folded towels, and rolls of bandage material. She spoke softly to Darcy, and he took the kettle from the stove and then followed her as she strode from the room.

Regan watched her go with regret. He sighed, and went to the table where she had stood and patted the spot briefly but with an evident sincerity of feeling. Then he shook his head and went to the sink and began to wash.

When he had finished drying himself with the towel, he folded it and used it as a flail to beat the dust out of his pants. He wiped his boots carefully—then stared at the towel in dismay. It had become a thoroughly disreputable object. He held it, glancing guiltily about the room, and in another moment he stuffed the damning evidence of his lack of breeding behind a china cabinet, where it would remain hidden indefinitely.

Fingering his dark-red hair into place as best he could, Regan strode back into the bedroom.

Andrea was bent over the figure of her father, having begun gingerly to remove the blood-soaked bandage Regan had made from his extra shirt. Darcy hovered nearby, looking white around the mouth.

REGAN HURRIED to assist the girl. Between them, they removed the shirt and then Garrett's own blood-matted garments beneath. Regan took over the task of washing the bullet wounds in Garrett's chest. Under the bite of the alcohol which Regan presently applied, Garrett stirred, moaned, and slowly came awake. He looked around for a long moment before understanding crept into his eyes.

A labored grin came to his lips as his gaze settled on Andrea. "'Lo, honey. Now...now don't y o u fret none."

"Dad!' she said. "Dad. . ." She had seen the wounds and now the knowledge of their seriousness trembled in her voice.

"Don't...you fret," Garrett re-

peated. He looked at Regan. "Got here, eh, son? Sure...sure could use a drink."

Regan nodded quickly and went outside to the buckboard. He found the bottle which he had opened earlier and returned to the bedroom. He held the bottle while Garrett drank with difficult swallows.

The old man settled back and closed his eyes. He lay motionless for a moment. Finally he stirred again and looked at Andrea.

"Want you to do something for me, honey... Fetch me a pen and paper, will you?"

A PUZZLED expression touched the girl's face. She hesitated and seemed about to speak. Then, as though having decided otherwise, she turned and left the room.

Garrett swung his head to Darcy. "Mr. Darcy...be obliged to have you leave me and Dan Regan."

"Why—of course." Darcy went out, flashing a speculative glance at Regan as he went by.

"Well, son...still want to go through with it?" Garrett asked when he and Regan were alone.

Regan nodded. "Even more than before, I guess. I've seen and heard some things that kind of make me want to clean house."

Garrett smiled faintly. "Hope you do a good job."

Andrea returned with the writing materials, and Regan helped the old rancher to a sitting position. Slowly, laboriously, Garrett began to write. Andrea watched him, a frown pinching the space between her glossy eyebrows. Regan leaned against a wall, looking steadily at the floor.

At last the scratching of Garrett's pen stopped. He leaned back against the pillows, breathing heavily.

"Here, son," Garrett said at last. He extended the sheet of paper upon which he had written. "Reckon this is legal enough. You...you're the boss from now on."

Andrea stared at Regan as he took the sheet, then turned to her father. "I don't understand. What is this all about?"

"Honey, I'm turning the ranch over to Dan Regan, here."

"You mean you're giving—" She crossed swiftly to the old man's side and caught at his arm. Incredulity twisted the delicate lines of her face. "Dad, do you know what you are doing?"

"My mind was never clearer than it is right now, honey."

"But. . .but you can't do this! I'm your daughter—your own flesh and blood. This man...why, he's a perfect stranger!"

Compassion showed on Garrett's aged features, yet there was firmness on them as well. "I'm doing what I think is best, honey. You'll see it that way before long. You know Abe Stroud is after the ranch. He's tricky . . .and he's mean. I. . .I'm pretty sure he's behind the men who shot me. A woman running the ranch wouldn't have much of a chance against him. It's a man's job...a job for a man like Dan Regan."

The girl's face was still perplexed. "But I still don't see why you had to give him the ranch. Why didn't you appoint him as foreman or something of the sort?"

"I have a good reason for that, too, honey. Please. . .don't fret. I've seen to it that you'll be provided for." Garret explained briefly and then closed his eyes and fell silent. His cheeks looked sunken and gray in the lamplight.

ANDREA straightened slowly and looked at Regan. There was indignation and hostility in her face—

and a very deep and bewildered pain.

Regan frowned intently at the sheet of paper in his hand. Yet he was sharply aware of the bitter violet eyes, and he shifted in discomfort.

Garrett remained quiet, breathing with difficulty. His efforts at speech seemed to have drained his last reserves of strength.

A tense stillness gathered within the room. Andrea sat down in a chair beside the bed. She did not move after that, and kept her face averted from Regan. He leaned against the wall and resumed his scrutiny of the floor.

Long, leaden minutes passed. Once Darcy appeared in the doorway. He took in the scene with an uneasy and faintly impatient expression, and when no one moved or spoke, he left.

Then the quick drumming of hoofbeats lifted in the distance and swelled to a rising volume of sound. Boots presently clattered on the porch stairs and came toward the bedroom. A short, ruddy-featured man entered. He had dark, grizzled hair powdered with gray at the temples, and his clothing, as much as the small black bag he carried, indicated that he was a doctor. He spoke a soft greeting to Andrea and nodded at Regan.

"You're the man who brought Cyrus in, eh? The punchers who fetched me told me about you. My name's Fulton."

Regan shook hands, and then Fulton began bustling about with a quiet competence, removing his coat and hat and beginning a swift examination of the figure in the bed. After a while he straightened, shaking his head somberly.

Andrea whispered, "What is it? Won't father—?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Garrett." Fulton's tone was gentle with sympathy. "I don't think Cyrus will live through the night. In fact, I'm surprised that he's hung on as long as he has."

The girl's face twisted. Tears abruptly filled her eyes, and she bent and pressed her hands against them as though in a futile effort to hold them back. Her slim shoulders shook with muffled sobs.

Time resumed its slow, torturous passage. Andrea presently regained control of her emotions, leaving the bedroom to make coffee. Only once was the silence broken. Fulton, checking Garrett's pulse, announced that the old rancher was sinking rapidly.

Later, finishing the last of his cup of coffee and feeling the need for a cigarette and a breath of fresh air, Regan strode quietly to the porch. Darcy was asleep in an armchair, his mouth open.

When Regan returned to the bedroom, Fulton was drawing the bedsheet over Garrett's face. Andrea stood with bowed shoulders, a handkerchief pressed tightly to her lips, her face pale with grief.

Regan stopped short, staring at the bed. Regret moved like a shadow over his lean face, but in his eyes a flame kindled, a gem-like, cold flame of bleak purpose and determination.

THE MORNING sun was well up into the sky when Regan emerged from the guest room where he had spent the remainder of the night. The murmur of voices and the clatter of dishes came from the direction of the dining room. He reached it to find Andrea and Darcy just finishing breakfast. Their conversation abruptly ended at his entrance.

"Good morning," Regan said.

Andrea nodded coldly, dark circles beneath her eyes. Darcy scowled at his coffee cup and remained silent.

Regan saw that a place had been set out for him, and he took it quietly. There was a neatly folded napkin

beside his plate. He picked it up, examined it with interest, and carefully laid it aside.

The strained quiet seemed to deepen.

Andrea rose, and Darcy hurried to pull back her chair. She hesitated, glancing at Regan with tightened lips.

"I intend to ride into town, to make arrangements for the funeral. Do you have any objections to that?"

"Why, no," Regan said quickly. "I don't see why I should."

"Since I wasn't trusted with the ranch, I thought you might feel I couldn't be trusted with anything else." Her voice was bitter.

Regan studied her gravely. "I'm sorry you feel like that. There's no real reason for it, though. Your father wanted an experienced hand to run the ranch, and that's about all it amounts to."

"Perhaps. But let me tell you something, Mr. Regan. If there is any way I can claim the ranch as mine, you can be certain that I'll take it!"

He nodded. "I guess I'd do the same if I were in your place. No hard feelings."

She looked down at her hands. "What do you plan to do? I mean, about the ranch."

"Well, I'm just going to run it the way your father would have wanted it to be run. And on the side sort of, I'm going to find the men who shot him. There's another matter I want to settle, too. Some personal business that brought me to Ortella."

The girl glanced up, and some of the coldness seemed to have left her face. "I've already spoken to the hired hands about you. I told them you were in charge. They'll take any orders you give."

"Thanks, Miss Garrett. I might have had trouble convincing them."

SHE SEEMED about to speak again, but in the next instant she lowered her face, turned, and left the room. Darcy followed her, his scowl more pronounced.

Regan heaped his plate and ate quickly, though with the air of a man whose mind was not on food. His weathered features were deeply reflective. An odd unhappiness lurked in his gray eyes.

Draining his third cup of coffee and then rolling a cigarette, Regan strode outside. A group of Rafter G punchers were gathered before the doorway of the bunkhouse. They were talking in low tones, with the troubled and uncertain air of men who had been visited with events that left them in grave doubt about the future. At Regan's approach, they fell silent, watching him in a way that indicated they were prepared not to like him.

"Morning, boys." Regan nodded pleasantly around the group and received grudging nods in return. He blew smoke, relaxed and easy, and went on, "Miss Garrett told me she had spoken to you, so you all know the ranch has been turned over to me. I suppose its pretty hard to understand how it happened, but I'll try to give you an idea."

Quietly, a man speaking without any attempt to curry favor or sympathy, Regan explained how he had met Garrett. Then he told of Garrett's offer and the main reason behind it. He described the old rancher's concern over the designs of Abe Stroud, but did not mention how Darcy was also involved. Finally, he touched briefly upon his own ranching experience.

The punchers nodded again. They were thoughtful. In their expressions was a friendliness and an understanding that had not been present before.

Regan asked, "Which one of you boys has been with this outfit the longest? Or, who is the one next in

line for the job that Weckler had?"

"Reckon that'd be Hondo Ellis, over there," one of the men said at last.

Voices quickly affirmed his choice.

Hondo Ellis was a lanky, raw-boned man with a drooping mustache. His features showed honesty and intelligence.

Regan grinned and extended his hand. "That makes you the ramrod, Hondo. Better make these cowpokes jump from now on, or I'll take it up with you personal."

Hondo Ellis beamed dazedly, then caught Regan's hand in a hard clutch. "You can count on me...boss!" He swallowed at a sudden obstruction in his throat and whirled fiercely on the now grinning punchers. "Hear that, you lazy no-account mavericks?"

He was answered by whoops of friendly derision.

INTRODUCTIONS followed, then Regan turned back to Hondo Ellis. "You know what needs to be done right away, so I'll leave you in charge. Later we'll go over the ranch and see how it stacks up. But right now I have a little business that I want to take care of."

The new foreman nodded quickly, and with a casual wave, Regan turned and strode toward the stable. The punchers watched him out of sight with admiring and slightly awed faces, and then they were suddenly abashed and could not meet each other's eyes.

"Now I know why the old man left him the ranch," Hondo muttered. "Not because of anything he said, but because of what he is. Why, we was practically laying for him. And he made us back down, every mother's son of us—and he made us like it! He'll do! Any man says otherwise has a busted nose coming!"

Regan located his saddle and his horse, and a short time later he rode away from the ranch. Guided by the landmarks Garrett had pointed out the previous evening, he found the section of road where the ambush had occurred. He slowed his mount, then, and sent his eyes searching along the ridge until he saw the approximate spot he was looking for. He gathered up the reins, preparing to send his horse up the slope in that direction.

Even as the animal moved, a shot roared and something brushed lash-like across Regan's left sleeve, near the elbow. For an instant he was rigid, and then, in a movement so swift as to be almost automatic he threw himself out of the saddle.

He landed on hands and knees, at once cushioning the fall and continuing it so as to bring himself behind the shelter of a clump of brush. He fingered his Navy Colt from its holster and flattened himself and waited.

There were no further shots. Silence closed down over the ridge, a heavy, crouching silence.

Minutes passed. Slowly, warily, Regan raised his head and peered through the thickly interlaced branches of his shielding brush clump. He found that his view of the ridge crest was cut off by an overhanging ledge of rock several feet up the slope. It put him at a disadvantage. He would be unable to see his attempted killer and get a shot at him should the man become certain that his bullet had gone home and thus reveal himself. Regan considered moving away from the obstructing ledge, but realized that doing so might betray the fact that he still lived.

Then he saw the ledge as something that would operate in his favor. The man on the crest was also unable to see beyond it. If he descended for an examination of his supposed victim, he would not see anyone hidden under the overhang.

WITH GREAT care, Regan crept from behind the brush clump and up the slope toward the ledge. At the same time, he heard the clatter of displaced stones as the man on the crest began climbing downward.

Regan had the lesser distance to go, and he reached the ledge and had time to settle himself before the other drew level with him. He saw the man appear a few yards to the left of the overhang, a carbine gripped in his hands. The man stood motionless a moment, his back to Regan, as he sent his eyes probing among the brush.

Regan spoke with deliberate softness. "Drop the rifle, friend!"

The other stiffened in dismay.

"I'm right behind you," Regan added. "A false move gets you a bullet in the back."

The man hesitated, his head turned toward the direction of Regan's voice. His body was rigid.

"The rifle," Regan went on. "Drop it. All right, now your hip hardware. And careful how you do it, friend."

The man removed his holstered gun with a thumb and forefinger and let it fall. He stood with hands away from his sides.

Regan waited long enough to be certain that there was no one else on the crest, then with leveled gun, crept from beneath the overhang. He straightened. "Turn around, you bushwhacking skunk."

Slowly the other turned. He looked at Regan. A spasm of recognition crossed his narrow face, and he stared in sudden dread.

Regan stared back, and then a bleak smile widened his lips. "Lafe Polk," he breathed. "I was expecting to meet up with you soon enough, but I didn't think it would be this soon! I trailed you all the way to Ortella for what you did to Cassidy. Two shots in the back of the head, Lafe—remember?"

LAFE POLK swallowed past an obstruction in his throat. He was a stoop-shouldered, bony man, with a sadistic mouth and deep-set, small dark eyes in which lurked a fox-like cunning. "You got your sign mixed, Regan. I don't know anything about Cassidy."

"Like hell you don't, Polk!" Regan's voice was harsh and abrupt. "You and Cassidy had been crossing each other for weeks. And a couple of hours before he was found dead at the livery stable, he had called your bluff and made you eat dirt. On top of that, you lit out of Elm Crossing the same night. What more proof does anyone need that you killed him? I'm satisfied, and Sheriff Johnson was satisfied. In fact, the sheriff deputized me to bring you in, Polk. Dead or alive."

"Deputized you?" Polk echoed. A momentary flicker of mockery overrode the fear in his face.

Regan nodded gravely. He slipped his free hand into a pocket and produced a badge, holding it out briefly in his palm and then replacing it. "Cassidy was the best friend I ever had, Polk. I'm going to see that you pay for what you did to him. I've got a good mind to shoot you down right here and now for the snake you are. I can always claim you were resisting arrest."

"Don't do it, Regan!" Sudden panic was sharp in Polk's voice. "You're in another county now, and you don't have no authority here. Besides, I have relatives in Ortella. They won't let you get away with killing me."

"I didn't say I would shoot you down," Regan said in contempt. "I just said I had a good mind to do it. Rotten as you are, Polk, I wouldn't put a bullet in you without giving you an even break. That's more than you did for Cassidy."

Regan jerked his gun in a ges-

ture. "Pick up your gun, Lafe Polk!"

"What...what are you going to do?"

"Give you an even break. Pick up your gun."

"No! I won't do it, Regan! I know what you can do with a gun. I wouldn't have a chance. You—"

Regan moved forward very quickly. Balled into a hard fist, his free hand crashed into the other's mouth, cutting off his fear-filled rush of words.

POLK WENT down. After a moment, he pushed himself to a sitting position on the ground. He shook his head and rubbed at his split and bleeding lips. Then he looked up at Regan. There was a stifled, wild hate in his small eyes.

"Pick up your gun, Polk!" Regan said again.

"No—you aren't going to get me that way, Regan. If you're going to shoot me, it'll be like this. But I've got friends in Ortella, and they'll get you for it. Better play it the smart way and take me in to the sheriff in town. I'll stand my chances with him."

Regan said nothing. He looked at Polk for a moment, then he threw a quick glance upward, toward the ridge crest.

"Why did you shoot at me from up there, Polk?"

"You was starting to come up. I thought—" Polk broke off sharply. His eyes flickered and his mouth pinched into an apprehensively secretive line.

"You wanted to keep me from coming up," Regan said slowly. "You wanted that badly enough to have killed me doing it. And yesterday evening Garrett of the Rafter G and his foreman, Gus Weckler, were drygulched by two men staked out in almost the same place from where you just took a shot at me. Were you one of those men, Polk?"

The other's face had a sudden drawn look. He shook his head with a desperate sincerity. "You got this all wrong, Regan. What you say about Garrett is a surprise to me. Sure, I took a shot at you, but I didn't know who you were, and out here, with you coming up at me like that, I couldn't take any chances."

"What were you doing up there in the first place?"

"I...I was just looking around, Regan—looking for some strayed beef. Honest, that's all I was doing. You can see a heap of country from up that hill."

"It's a hell of a long coincidence," Regan said softly. "You being the kind of snake you are, Polk, and you being up there after Garrett was killed, and you being primed to shoot anybody who showed up. You know what I think? I think you were up there to wipe out sign. I think you were one of the two drygulchers who finished Garrett and Weckler yesterday, and you figured somebody might come out here and look around, and you wanted to play it safe. Maybe, even, you had to get away in a hell of a hurry, and you left something there that would put a rope around your neck."

Polk shrugged jerkily. "That's your idea, Regan. Other folks won't agree with you—the sheriff in Ortella, for one. Listen...you take me in to the sheriff—Ike Kelso. You tell him your story and see what he says."

Regan nodded slowly, speculation showing deep in his gray eyes. "I think I'll do that, Polk. If Kelso has any sense at all, he'll see it my way. And if you don't hang for Garrett's killing, you'll sure as hell hang for Cassidy's!"

Regan's horse was cropping grass a short distance away. Kicking Polk's

weapons beyond easy reach, and without relaxing his watch over the man, Regan went to the animal and mounted. Then he paced his captive up the slope of the ridge and along the crest to where Polk had tied his own horse. A short time later they were riding toward Ortella.

THE TOWN looked quiet and pleasant in the late morning sunlight. Its neat frame buildings and broad, tree-lined streets had a thriving, solidly-settled atmosphere.

Polk led the way down Ortella's main thoroughfare. His and Regan's passage was followed by the wondering eyes of townfolk along the board sidewalks on either side. Regan had holstered his gun shortly after entering the town, but the way he followed Polk indicated his purpose as clearly as his held weapon would have done.

The jail proved to be a small brick structure to one side of the court house. A lone horse swung its tail at the hitch rack.

Regan slid from his saddle and tied the reins of his mount, gray eyes fixed vigilantly on Polk. A faint puzzlement narrowed them. Polk seemed much too calm and assured for a man about to be accused of grave charges before an officer of the law.

A short, thick-set man with lumpy features was seated in the jail office, his feet propped up on a roll-top desk. The air was acrid with the smoke of the corncob pipe gripped between his teeth. A badge gleamed on his grease-stained vest as he swung around at the entrance of Regan and Polk.

"Sheriff Kelso?" Regan asked.

The other nodded his shaggy, mouse-colored head. "That's me. Stranger to town, ain't you? Want to see me about something?"

"I want to talk to you about putting a man in jail, Sheriff." Regan hooked his thumbs in his belt and jerked his head briefly at Polk. "That man."

Kelso placed his corncob pipe on the desk and swung his feet to the floor. "Lafe?" He sounded incredulous. "What do you mean? What's this all about?" He turned a bewildered face toward Polk.

Leaning against a wall near the desk, Polk moved one of his bony shoulders in a careless shrug. His fingers were busy with the makings of a cigarette.

"Let Regan tell it, Ike. It'll sound funnier that way."

Regan frowned slightly as a definite oddness about Polk's behavior struck him again. The familiarity between him and Kelso seemed to indicate something, but Regan couldn't decide just what it was. Then, as Kelso's gaze returned to him, he settled himself determinedly.

"Sheriff, Cyrus Garrett and Gus Weckler were murdered by a couple of drygulchers yesterday evening. It happened near the fork in the road that leads toward Garrett's spread. I happened to be passing by when the shooting started, and I took a hand sort of and ran the drygulchers off. Garrett was badly wounded at the time, and he died later. Weckler was killed by the first shots.

"I took Garrett home, and then this morning I rode back to where the shooting happened, wanting to see if I could find some sign that would give me a lead on the drygulchers. Somebody took a shot at me, and a few minutes later I got the drop on the jasper. It turned out to be Lake Polk, here."

KELSO THREW a quick, startled look at the man. Polk blew smoke from a corner of his mouth and met the sheriff's gaze woodenly. In another moment Kelso's eyes dropped,

and he reached for the pipe on his desk, lumpy features uneasy and thoughtful.

"Polk claimed he was out hunting some stray cattle," Regan went on. "But it's mighty strange that he should be looking for them in the place where Garrett and Weckler were shot, and that he should be jumpy enough to try to kill anybody who came near him. Sheriff, I figure Lafe Polk was there to wipe out sign. I'm dead certain he was one of the two men who drygulched Garrett and Weckler. I knew him before he came to Ortella, and I know he's mean enough to drygulch a man or shoot him in the back."

"What do you mean by that?" Kelso asked in a distant voice.

"A friend of mine by the name of Cassidy was murdered in Elm Crossing a short time ago," Regan said. "Cassidy had been having trouble with Polk, and on the evening he was killed he made Polk back down and eat dirt. And the same evening Polk hightailed it out of town. I was sure Polk was the killer and intended to go after him. The sheriff back in Elm Crossing was sure, too, and he deputized me to make it legal."

Regan produced his badge and held it out for Kelso's inspection. From his lounging position against the wall, Polk released a jeering snort.

"You're in another county, Regan. That badge isn't any good here. You'd have to have Kelso's cooperation to take me back to Elm Crossing—and Kelso isn't going to help you." Polk turned his mocking eyes on the sheriff. "Tell him why, Ike."

Kelso looked uncomfortable. "Don't be too sure of yourself, Lafe. I might help to send you back."

"No, you won't," Polk said. "And you know why. Because I'm Abe Stroud's brother-in-law. Abe got you the sheriff's job and you have to do what he says if you want to keep it."

"I see it now," Regan said. He spoke in a bleak, low tone, as though more to himself than to Polk. "Stroud's one of the relatives you have in Ortella. That explains why you were acting so sure of yourself. You were counting on Stroud to help you."

"He'll help me, all right," Polk said. "He's a big boss in these parts, Regan—too big for you to buck."

Regan shook his head slowly. "You're forgetting something, Polk. Maybe Stroud will keep Kelso from letting me take you back to Ortella—but there's still Garrett's killing. I don't think he can get you out of that."

Polk smiled thinly. "You wait and see."

REGAN'S FACE grew still and cold. Only his eyes had life. Within them a dawning certainty glittered. His voice was flat, edged.

"If Shroud backs you up over Garrett's killing, it means he's the one behind it. Maybe, even, he had a hand in it. Before he died, Garrett told me Stroud was after the Rafter G, because he wanted the water on the spread. And it looks like Stroud wanted the water bad enough to take a chance on drygulching Garrett, not being able to get it any other way."

Polk's deep-set eyes were lidded. "That's strong talk, Regan. It'll bring you plenty of trouble here in Ortella."

"That so?" Regan moved. He walked toward the other. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. That doesn't mean you and Stroud aren't at the bottom of Garrett's killing."

Polk straightened up from his leaning position against the wall, apprehension leaping into his narrow face. "Regan, don't you try—"

Regan's hand closed on his shirt front and jerked him forward. The

back of Regan's other hand sliced through the air, making a sharp sound as it hit the side of Polk's face. Polk's head rocked with the blow, and his hat slid down over one ear.

"Admit it, you drygulching snake!" Regan said, his tone harsh and urgent. "You murdered Garrett, and Stroud put you up to it. Admit it!"

Kelso pushed out of his chair, lumpy features twisted in alarm. "Stop that, Regan! Let him alone!"

Polk twisted in Regan's grasp. His fingers closed over Regan's hand, and his nails gouged deep as he sought to free himself. Jamming the other back against the wall, Regan swung again, his hand doubled into a fist this time. The knuckles struck Polk in the mouth, splitting his lips and knocking the back of his head against the wall. Polk's hat fell to the floor. Pain struggled through the dazed blankness on his face.

"Regan!" Kelso said again. "You hear me? I got a gun on you. If you don't—"

Regan jerked his head around. A hard, leaping brightness glittered in his eyes. "One lawman to another, sheriff! Two minutes—give me two minutes and I'll have this skunk talking. It's your chance to be your own boss, not a stuffed dummy."

Kelso hesitated. He licked his lips, an inward struggle mirrored in his features.

Polk stirred and whimpered past his swelling lips. "Regan...don't..."

HOOFS DRUMMED outside the jail building and pounded to a stop near the door. Booted feet hit the ground. A moment later the door was flung open, and three men leaped into the room. Their eyes took in the scene, and almost as one they drew their guns. The muzzles centered on Regan.

One of the three arrivals stepped forward. He was a tall, portly man, with an aggressive, fleshy face. Dissipation showed in the veins on his nose and in the pouches under his hard, black eyes. He wore a wrinkled but expensive gray suit, the trouser cuffs stuffed into stitched boots, and a checked vest hung with a massive gold watch chain, its buttoned edges gaping where it strained over his bulging middle. Stiff, wiry dark hair showed at his temples, under the brim of his custom-made hat.

"What's going on here?" he demanded. He jerked his gun at Regan. "Take your hands off Lafe, you!"

Regan studied the portly man calmly, then glanced at the other's two companions. These latter were lean-bodied men, with the cold, set faces of hired gunhands.

Swinging his eyes back to the portly man, Regan asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm Abe Stroud, stranger. And if you're smart, you'll jump when I tell you to do something. Now turn Lafe loose, or you'll get a bullet in the guts."

Regan looked at the ready guns in the hands of the group, and reluctantly he released Polk and stepped back. Polk straightened and pulled at his clothes, his former arrogance now swiftly returning. He nodded at the portly man.

"Good thing you came in when you did, Abe."

"Me and the boys just reached town," Stroud said. "I heard you and this stranger were seen riding toward the jail, and it looked mighty like the stranger was bringing you in. So I thought I'd better see what it was all about."

Polk darted a vengeful glance at Regan. "This ornery sidewinder claims I drygulched Garrett and his foreman yesterday evening. He was trying to make me say I did it when you showed up."

Stroud's black eyes narrowed a little. He turned a slow glance to Regan, and then a faint smile lifted one corner of his broad lips. "Garrett's dead, eh? Too bad. But what makes this jasper think you had anything to do with it, Lafe?"

"I was out hunting some strays a while back. Near the place where Garrett and his foreman were shot. Regan, there, snuck up and put a gun on me. He claimed I was at the place to wipe out sign, and that meant I was one of the killers."

STROUD TURNED lidded eyes to Regan. "Who are you? What do you know about Garrett's killing?"

Regan outlined what he had already told Kelso, explaining the mission that had brought him to Ortella and how he had happened to be nearby at the time Garrett and Weckler were attacked. He produced his badge again.

Stroud's mouth curled in contempt as he glanced at the object. "That piece of tin doesn't carry any weight in this county, Regan. Even if Lafe did shoot this friend of yours, I'm warning you to leave him alone. He's my brother-in-law, and I stick by my relations. Besides, my word is law here in Ortella, and if you try to go against me it'll be the last thing you ever do."

Stroud gestured. "As for Garrett's killing, Lafe didn't have anything to do with it. I've got over a dozen men who will swear he was at my ranch all day yesterday. That's better than you can do, Regan. Don't forget, we have only your word about how Garrett was killed. For all we know, you might have done it yourself."

Polk said abruptly, "Abe—sure he did! Then this morning he came back to wipe out sign, only I got there before him and saw his tracks. He put a gun on me and tried to get out of it by making the whole thing look like I was the killer."

Stroud's broad lips spread in a cold, slow smile. "It could have happened that way. In fact, it *did* happen that way—if I say so." He glanced at the sheriff. "Looks like we caught Garrett's killer, Ike, don't you think?"

"Yeah. . .looks like it," Kelso said evasively. He didn't meet any of the eyes turned toward him.

"Regan's a killer—a mad killer!" Polk said. "We can't take any chances with him. Better lock him up, sheriff."

Stroud rocked his big head up and down with elaborate solemnity. "A wise thing to do, I'd say."

A CORNER of Regan's lips twisted in a grin, mirthless and derisive. "Grab hold of something, gents. Don't get stampeded by the idea. Before you start measuring me for a frame, you ought to make sure it'll stick."

"It isn't a frame," Stroud said. "You killed Garrett, all right. You were on hand when he was drygulched. And then, this morning, Lafe caught you at the place, trying to hide your tracks."

"Lafe didn't catch me doing anything," Regan said. "And if any tracks were hid, he was the one doing it. He was up where the killers were the evening before, and he was skittish enough to take a shot at me when I got too close." He gestured in finality. "Besides, Lafe had a reason for wanting to kill Garrett—your reason, Stroud. Lafe is working for you. What reason would I have?"

"Robbery, maybe," Stroud said solidly, his eyes hard. "Or maybe you thought Garrett was somebody else. Or maybe you were hired to do it."

The derisive grin returned to Regan's lips. "I shot Garrett and wounded him bad, and then I took him to his ranch and waited around for him to die. And all the time he

never got the idea that I was the one who did the dirty work. In fact, he was so plumb unsuspicious that he signed his ranch over to me. Better think of something that will hold water, Stroud."

The other was staring. "Garrett signed his ranch over to you!"

"I think I said it loud enough."

"It's a lie—a rotten lie!" Stroud's voice was thick.

Regan lifted one shoulder in a gesture of indifference. "Garrett's daughter will back me up. So will the title Garrett wrote out for me before he died."

Stroud took a sudden step forward, the sagging gun in his hand raising again with renewed menace. "The title. . .let me see it!"

"Sorry I can't oblige you, Stroud. I don't carry papers around where any jasper can get a look at them by pointing a gun at me."

"I think you're running a bluff—but I never miss any bets." Stroud jerked his head at Polk. "Search this maverick, Lafe."

Polk's deep-set eyes lighted with an animal glitter. He woke into sly motion, a hungry smile deepening the cruel lines of his mouth.

Regan ignored the man for the moment as he swung a harshly demanding glance to Kelso. "This is attempted robbery, sheriff. Are you going to let these skunks get away with it in your own office?"

The other had been chewing uneasily at the stem of his corncob pipe. He removed it now, with an evident hesitation, and turned to Stroud.

"Abe, I reckon he's right. I don't think you ought—"

"Keep out of this, Ike!" Stroud broke in sharply. "What do you suppose I got you put in office for, damn it!" He gestured at Polk. "Go ahead, Lafe."

SWIFTLY, POLK ran his hands through Regan's clothes. He was not gentle about it, deliberately tearing the cloth in a number of places. Regan said nothing. He did not seem to be aware of the search. His gray eyes were fixed intently on Stroud, and his spare face held a black yearning.

Polk found nothing. But apparently he did not intend to miss the opportunity presented by Regan's momentary helplessness. Lips curling in a snarl, he abruptly stepped up close, and his knee swung viciously into Regan's groin. And then, as Regan doubled in agony, he brought his bony fist down in a chopping blow to the side of Regan's head.

Regan fell to hands and knees. He crouched for a long moment on the floor, eyes squeezed shut, shaking his head from side to side.

Polk's eyes were abnormally bright. He stepped toward Regan again, one of his booted feet swinging back for a kick.

"Hold it, Lafe!" Stroud grunted. "I want him in shape to do business."

Regan stopped shaking his head. His eyes opened. Slowly, as though pushing himself up through a thick layer of mud, he stood erect. He looked around and found Polk and kept looking at him.

The excitement he had shown in the inflicting of pain now left Polk. He retreated at what he saw in Regan's face, moistening his lips.

"You're going to pay for that, Polk," Regan whispered. "You're going to pay—with interest added for every day I have to wait."

"Forget it, Regan," Stroud said. His tone as well as his manner had become conciliatory. He holstered his gun and gestered at a chair. "Sit down. Let's talk this over friendly-like."

"You go to hell, Stroud," Regan said. "I've done all the talking to you

that I aim to do right now or ever."

"Oh, forget it!" The portly rancher waved his hand. "I know you were treated sort of rough, but that's what happens when you get mixed up in other people's business. I'll write the whole thing off as a mistake, and we'll start over." Regan did not move or speak, and Stroud went on: "Now look, Regan, you're giving it to me fair and square about Garrett signing the Rafter G over to you? I can check up with the girl, you know."

"I said you could."

"All right, I'll take your word for it. Now, suppose we make a deal? I want the Rafter G, and I want it bad You turn the title over to me, and I'll give you twenty-five hundred in cash."

"That's less than a tenth of what the ranch is worth."

STROUD MOVED his heavy shoulders. "Maybe. But don't forget, the ranch didn't cost you anything, Regan. You'll be making a nice profit on something that was dumped in your lap without a lick of work or expense."

"No," Regan said.

"I'll make it thirty-five hundred.

"The answer is still no. You couldn't pay me what I think the ranch is worth, Stroud."

The rancher's fleshy face showed traces of anger, which he was evidently controlling only with effort. "Well, what is it worth?"

"It's worth keeping a promise to a dying man. It's worth independence and comfort and the chance to be happy. And it's worth the lives of a couple of sneaking killers—one of them the man who gave the orders, and the other the man who pulled the trigger."

Stroud's black eyes were lidded. He said slowly, "You're a fool, Regan. I'm giving you the chance to keep your health and make some easy money. You go against me, and you won't get anything but a bellyful of lead."

He leaned forward, his voice taking on a flat, implacable note. "Get me straight, Regan. I want the Rafter G, and one way or another I'm going to get it. Either turn the title over to me, or get out of Ortella. Otherwise, you'll die as sure as the sun comes up. In fact, I think it would be a good idea to kill you here and now. It would be easier to make a deal with Garrett's daughter. She's a woman and wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight."

Polk spoke abruptly. "Abe, killing Regan is the best thing to do. Don't take any chances with him. He's a troublemaker."

"Not here!" Kelso put in. "Not in the jail office. There's a limit to what folks in Ortella will take, Abe. You ought to know that. Besides, Regan's a deputy, and that means something, even if he is from another county."

Stroud seemed not to have heard either man. He fingered a fat cigar from a pocket of his vest. Rolling it in his fingers, he studied Regan from under lowered lids. Finally he said, "I'll give you five thousand for the title, Regan. That's as high as I'll go This is your last chance."

"No," Regan said.

"All right." Stroud took a slow breath, his upper lip flat against his teeth. "You've dug your grave, and I'm going to see that you're put in it. Not right here, not even right now—but your time is running out fast. Remember that."

He jerked the cigar in a gesture toward the door. "Get out."

Regan bent to pick up his fallen hat. A cold, malignant silence filled the jail office. He glanced once more at Stroud, then let his eyes settle and linger on Polk. It was as though he

sought to fix the scene permanently in his mind. Then he turned, slanting the hat back over his head, and walked past the two gunmen and out the door.

AT THE hitchrack, he untied his horse and swung into the saddle. A group of men stood diagonally across the street, their attention having been fixed on the jail office. They watched him in tense interest. Casually he rode past them, guiding his mount toward the center of town.

Only when he was a considerable distance from the jail did Regan glance back. Stroud's two gunmen were lounging in the open doorway. They had the attitude of men who had nothing to do and who expected nothing to happen.

Turning his head again a few seconds later, Regan saw the pair sauntering toward the horses tethered in front of the jail. Presently they were riding in his direction, relaxed and unhurried, men without plan or purpose.

Squinting thoughtfully, Regan rolled a cigarette. He sent his eyes over the buildings that lined the street. They settled on one that bore the sign and swinging doors of a saloon.

He dismounted in front of it, looking back as he tethered his horse. The two gunmen were drifting toward him. They seemed asleep in their saddles.

He went into the saloon. Only a few men were present. They were gathered at the lower end of the bar, talking in aimless fashion.

He leaned his elbows on the bar and glanced into the mirror opposite him. The swinging doors were easily visible. He had time to assure himself of that fact before the bartender came up to where he stood.

He ordered a beer, and as the bartender turned away to fill a glass, he dropped a casual hand to his holstered gun, shifting it to a more easily accessible position on his hip.

He drank the beer slowly, watching the swinging doors in the mirror. They opened after several minutes had passed, and a man strode in. He was not one of the two gunswifts who had followed Regan from the jail. The newcomer joined the group at the lower end of the bar, and the talk became more animated.

Regan relaxed again. Time passed slowly. Watching the mirror, he frowned. His gaze wandered restlessly over the room, then stopped as he noted a door in the wall at the far side, across from him. He studied it a moment longer and gestured to the bartender.

"That door leads outside, doesn't it?"

"Uh, huh. Place is at the back. Just draw the bolt."

Regan nodded, grinning faintly, and strode toward the door. He found the bolt, slid it aside, and let himself out.

HE STOOD in a narrow passage between the saloon and the building next to it. He glanced toward the narrow section of street visible at the front end, then turned his gaze to the alley at the rear. His grin reappeared briefly, but there was no humor in it now.

He walked swiftly toward the alley and then along it until he reached the end of the block. He came out on a side street, and now, walking more slowly, he continued along this to the thoroughfare on which the saloon was located. He crossed to the opposite side, slowing his progress still further to give the impression of a man sauntering along in a lazy, purposeless fashion.

Shortly, he caught sight of the two gunmen. They had dismounted a short

distance opposite the saloon and had taken up positions in the shadow under the wooden canopy of a hardware store. Now they were leaning against the front of the building, hats slanted down over their faces, one with his arms crossed, the other with his thumbs looped over his gunbelt. They were watching the swinging doors of the saloon.

Regan stopped, glancing slowly about him. He stood in front of a frame structure housing a feed store. A few feet away, at the side of the building, were a number of piled sacks. They offered a comfortable seat, and were so placed that anyone seated on them would not be easily visible to others on the same side of the street.

Regan strolled over to the sacks and sat down. He pushed the brim of his hat down over his eyes and leaned back and became motionless.

The two gunmen continued to watch the saloon. Occasionally they shifted with impatience, or exchanged a few brief words. They rolled and lighted cigarettes, and smoked them and threw them away.

A buggy came down the street at an unhurried pace. A man and a girl occupied the seat, the man holding the reins.

Regan stiffened slightly as he recognized Andrea and Darcy. The two sat quietly, not speaking. Darcy looked bored and somewhat weary. Andrea's eyes were large and shadowed with grief.

The buggy went past Regan, but did not continue much further. Following it with his eyes, he saw it draw up before a small frame building near the corner.

Darcy appeared. He rounded the buggy and helped Andrea to the sidewalk. She went into the small building, which, Regan now saw from the sign over the front, was a millinery shop. Evidently, Andrea intended to buy a black hat or veil, or both. Darcy remained outside, leaning against the buggy.

RETURNING his gaze to the two gunmen, Regan saw that they had become alerted by something down the street. A couple of mounted riders were approaching—Stroud and Polk. The gunmen waited until the latter two drew abreast, then one stepped out to the edge of the street. Stroud sighted him, edged closer, and drew rein. They spoke briefly. Stroud nodded in a grimly satisfied way and glanced toward the saloon. Adding a few more words, he put his horse back into motion, Polk following.

They did not see Regan as they went by. He sat slumped on the feed sacks, hat over his face.

He waited until the footfalls of their mounts began to fade with distance, then turned cautiously to peer after them. As he did so, he became aware that Darcy had strolled a few yards from the buggy and was now standing at the edge of the sidewalk, watching Stroud and Polk.

Stroud seemed to notice Darcy, also. For a moment, it appeared that the rancher would do nothing more than ride on past with only a glance of recognition. But abruptly, he drew up beside Darcy and leaned down to speak.

Darcy looked warily interested. Then the wariness left his face. He smiled a slow smile and nodded at Stroud.

Stroud spoke a few words to Polk and dismounted. He joined Darcy on the sidewalk, and as if by some common agreement, they strode the short distance to the corner.

Regan saw them mount the steps to the porch of a hotel situated there. They disappeared inside, while Polk, leading Stroud's mount by the reins,

turned into the intersecting street and rode out of sight.

Regan raked his lower lip between his teeth, frowning in thought. Curiosity showed in his face—and a dark yearning as his eyes left the hotel entrance and lingered on the spot where he had last seen Polk. He shrugged regretfully and returned his attention to the two gunmen.

There was only one in front of the hardware store now.

Regan tensed, his glance darting about in search of the other. In another moment, he found the man. The second tough had walked some distance down the street, and then had crossed to the side on which the saloon stood. He was walking slowly toward it, thumbs looped over his gunbelt. His companion watched and waited in obvious tension.

THE WALKING man reached the saloon. He eased up to the swinging doors, one hand on the butt of his gun. He pushed a panel inward with his free hand and glanced inside. Then, flashing a brief glance at his watching partner, he went in.

Regan stood up. Smoothly, quietly, he walked toward the waiting tough. He drifted over the boards of the sidewalk like a shadow over moss ...easily, gently, keeping close to the buildings at his side.

"Looking for me?" Regan said.

The gunswift's face twisted, a shudder of movement that might end in a draw or in a shout of alarm. Regan did not wait to see the result.

The impact of fist on chin made a sharp thud of sound. The gunswift's head snapped to one side, face suddenly idiot-like in its lack of conscious expression. He swayed and began to fall.

With a swift movement that was almost a continuation of his blow, Regan caught the man under the armpits and lowered him to a sitting position on the edge of the sidewalk, head on bent knees, the backs of his hands resting limply in the dust of the street. He looked like a tippler who had had a few drinks too many and who was now sleeping it off.

Swift and almost soundless, the incident evidently had attracted no attention. Regan paused only long enough to assure himself of this before he glided toward the saloon.

He was a few yards away, when the panels abruptly flew open. The second tough appeared on the sidewalk, looking angry and chagrined. In the next instant, he saw Regan. His anger was replaced by a stare of surprise, by flashing comprehension —and then by sudden, deadly purpose.

His hand snapped down to his holstered gun.

Regan had had but little more warning than the tough himself. He went for his own weapon. His hand moved with an odd precision, a cool deliberateness, that yet was accompanied by a blurred, eye-confusing speed.

The roar of a shot blasted the lethargic quiet that hung over the street.

The tough had his gun in his hand. His finger was on the trigger, and the muzzle was trained on Regan. He'd had time to accomplish only this. His face held shock. Then it twisted with an awareness of pain, and the gun in his hand dropped as purpose and courage left him. He reached up with the hand that until now had remained out of action, and he gripped at his shoulder where Regan's bullet had gone.

Regan strode up to the man, his features set and cold. He said quietly, "The next time Stroud sends you after me, I shoot to kill. That goes for anybody else he might give or-

ders to. You can tell him I said so."

Kicking aside the other's fallen gun, Regan went to the hitchrack in front of the saloon where he had left his horse. Heads were craning out of doors and windows along the street, but he ignored them as he mounted and sent his horse at a brisk trot out of Ortella.

"ASHES TO ashes, and dust to dust..."

The preacher's deep, sonorous voice faded, and the last few fragments of earth fell from his hand onto the lid of the oak coffin which was the final resting place of Cyrus Garrett.

A sob broke the hushed stillness of the little graveyard as the coffin was slowly lowered. Violet eyes brimming with tears, Andrea turned blindly to Darcy, pressing her face against his coat. He patted her shoulder awkwardly, looking uncomfortable.

Regan glanced at the girl in sympathy, then looked quickly away. He did not relish the sight of her being consoled by Darcy—even a half-hearted Darcy.

The small gathering of ranchers and townfolk who had attended the funeral were now starting to leave. Regan jerked his head at Hondo Ellis and strode from the graveyard, toward the spot along the encircling fence where he had tethered his horse. Ellis followed, squirming and ill-at-ease in his stiff collar and suit coat. He was one of several Rafter G riders who had been present at the burial service. The others now followed in turn, rolling smokes and talking in low voices.

Regan was silent during the greater part of the return trip to the ranch. Hondo Ellis glanced at his profile repeatedly, hesitating. Finally he threw away the cigarette he had been smoking and said, "You thinking about the things that skypilot said...or what happened in town the other day?"

Regan glanced around quizzically. "You've heard about that?"

"This morning. Fellow from town told me." Ellis added mildly, "You might at least have dropped a hint about it."

"Wasn't much to talk about."

"Not much to talk about! Great snakes, those two hardcases were a couple of Stroud's best men—both of them with a whale of a rep as gunfighters. And you went against them and made them look like kids with slingshots! They were after your scalp, too."

"I don't think so," Regan said. "Most likely Stroud just wanted

them to throw a scare into me. Maybe to see how I stacked up."

"You should have finished them off proper. You made them look pretty useless, and now they'll be after you, wanting to cut you down to size."

REGAN shrugged. "Then they'll know what to expect. They were just following orders, and I wanted to give them a chance. Stroud's the one who needs quick killing."

"He's a hard man to get at," Ellis said somberly. "He has things fixed so he can stack the cards the way he wants them. And he ain't through with this business. Not by a long shot. What do you figure he'll try next?"

"I don't know—but I have a kind of sneaking idea about it. That's why I didn't want to lose any time about getting back to the ranch."

"Say! You don't think he'll try anything there?"

"I wouldn't bet against it. Stroud was dead certain to find out about the funeral today, and he'd figure that most of us would go. That would leave only a few hands at the ranch. It's almost too good a chance to miss." Regan shook his head slightly, frowning. "I told Miss Garrett it would be a good idea for the hands to stick close to the ranch, but she said letting them go to the funeral was the only decent thing to do. She had plenty to put up with as it was, and I didn't want to make a fuss. Best I could do was get her to agree that the only ones to go were those who had known Garrett the longest. That way several hands would be around in case anything happened."

Regan fell silent, while the horses trotted the remaining distance to the Rafter G. Once, Hondo Ellis glanced at him and seemed about to speak. Then, glancing at Regan more sharply, he remained quiet.

A short time later, as the horses climbed a rise in the road, Ellis released a startled exclamation and caught at Regan's arm. He pointed tensely.

"Look there! Smoke! And it's coming from the ranch houses!"

Regan peered in the indicated direction and swore softly. "Come on!"

They reached the burning buildings at a reckless gallop, flinging themselves from their saddles before their mounts had time to come to a full skidding halt. They were met by a handful of grim, smoke-blackened men. The bunkhouse, barn, and a few of the smaller structures were in flames, but the ranch house, it appeared, had been spared.

"What happened?" Regan demanded of the nearest man, a wiry puncher whose tow-colored hair had been singed badly in spots.

"BUNCH OF coyotes tried to burn us out, it looks like. About a dozen of 'em. They must've spread out and sneaked up close, 'cause they came riding hell-for-leather from all directions afore we knew what was going on. We was holed up in the ranch house like you said we should, but there wasn't much we could do. Most of them kept peppering us, and the rest started the buildings to burning. Kept us hugging cover till the fires were going good, too, they did! Then they lit out."

"Did you recognize any of the men?" Regan asked.

The puncher nodded slowly. "I'm pretty sure they was Abe Stroud's hands. They moved around fast, though, when they wasn't sticking close to cover. The whole thing was over almost before you could bite off a chaw."

Further questions revealed that only two of the defenders had been

wounded, neither seriously. There was considerable doubt whether any damage had been done to the attackers.

Regan began issuing swift orders, splitting the men into groups to resume fighting the flames. They worked in grim haste, the majority wielding soaked blankets or sacks, while the rest formed a bucket brigade.

Gripping a couple of wet feed sacks, Regan joined in the effort to save the barn. The other structures were already far gone in flames, but through some quirk of air currents, only a small portion of the barn was seriously threatened.

Regan's lips were flat against his teeth in a soundless snarl as he flailed at the fire. It was as though he fought a human enemy, forcing him back step by reluctant step. Men moved around him like denizens of some miniature inferno, limned grotesquely against the livid backdrop of flames, exhorting each other in grim voices or calling for more water and wet sacks.

Exhaustion deepened the lines of Regan's face, but doggedly he worked on. Awareness of time was lost in a blur of physical action. Smoke blackened him and singed his hair, and blazing embers ate unnoticed holes in his clothes.

Finally the barn was out of danger. With one man left on guard against any possible new outbreaks of fire, Regan and the others of his group hurried to the aid of those fighting the blaze at the bunkhouse.

Another timeless interval of smoke and flame and harried, desperate labor. And then the last defiant ember died amid wisps of steam and a faint, angry hissing.

REGAN WAS sitting on a salvaged bench, eyes fixed in weary brooding on the blackened skeleton of the bunkhouse, when Andrea appeared beside him. Her black dress was smudged with dust and soot, her hair disarranged. He had been aware, in a distracted way, that she and Darcy had returned to the ranch and had been giving somewhat futile assistance in the battle against the flames. Andrea, however, had been clear-minded enough to shift her efforts to ministering to those who had been burned or sickened by smoke. She had also attended to the two punchers who had been wounded in the attack.

Only now did Regan notice the girl directly. She looked tired and bitter—and accusing.

"A couple of the men told me how it happened," she said. "They seem to think that Abe Stroud's riders were the ones who set the buildings on fire."

Regan nodded gravely. "I'd say there wasn't any doubt about it."

"And I'd say that it was entirely your fault, Mr. Regan!"

He stared at her in surprise. "What do you mean?"

"You're the one who led Abe Stroud to attack the ranch. I heard about your fight in town with two of his men."

"Then you didn't hear the whole story," Regan said shortly. "Stroud sent those men after me. They were out to make trouble. All I did was give them some help they didn't expect."

"But you supplied Stroud with an excuse to make matters worse!" Andrea insisted.

"Not any worse than he's been making them," Regan returned with dogged patience. "He was stirring up trouble before I came along, you know. And about excuses, Stroud didn't need an excuse for your father's killing, Miss Garrett. All he

needed was to want it done, to send out a couple of bushwacking skunks who would follow orders."

The girl made an abrupt, despairing gesture. "Perhaps that's true—but why can't you settle things in a civilized way? Why can't you be gentlemen? Do you have to fight and kill and burn like savages?"

Sudden tears filling her eyes, she whirled and hurried toward the house. Regan glanced morosely after her, then sighed and ran the palm of his hand hard against his cheek.

Hondo Ellis strode up, shaking his head. "Miss Andrea seemed sort of mixed up about things. Most likely she didn't mean what she said. It's all happened too fast for her, I reckon, her father getting killed and the ranch buildings being burned."

Regan nodded and remained silent.

Ellis went on: "You were right about Stroud, though. I been talking to the boys. They'll go against Stroud's gang any time you give the word. After what he did here, Stroud has a dose of his own medicine coming to him."

"No," Regan said. "He'd be expecting that. We'd walk straight into a trap."

"You have anything else in mind?"

"Sort of. It needs some weaning. Right now, though, we have enough to keep us busy. First thing to do is get the barn patched up, so the boys can bunk there tonight. Let's get to work."

REGAN AND Hondo Ellis sat their mounts on the lip of a rocky ridge, from which the land sloped down to the banks of a broad stream running through the hilly western end of the Rafter G. Cattle were wandering along the stream or standing in groups beneath the trees which grew along its edges. It was a gray, chilly morning, and a stiff breeze filled the air with a mournful rustling sound.

Regan flipped away the butt of the cigarette he had been smoking, gazing at the water with thoughtful eyes. He said softly, "So this is what Stroud is after."

Ellis nodded. "The stream is kept fed by water that comes down out of the hills. No worry about it drying up like Stroud's water is doing."

"All we have to worry about is hanging on to it." Regan grinned faintly and gestured. "Well, let's have a look at the north end of the ranch. That'll finish my inspection."

Ellis started his horse into motion, Regan following at his side.

"How does the ranch stack up so far?" Ellis asked after a while.

"One of the best I've seen," Regan said. He added reflectively, "Make a nice place to settle on and raise kids."

"Reckon so." Ellis gave Regan a quizzical, sidewise glance.

Unaware of it, Regan went on, "You know, after what I've seen, I'd say Stroud wanted more than just the water on the Rafter G. He'd like to have the ranch, too."

"Guess you're right," Ellis said. "But he certainly has a skunk way of trying to get it. Talking about Stroud, I've been trying to figure out which two of his men were the ones who drygulched old man Garrett and Gus Weckler. You have any ideas?"

Regan nodded grimly. "I'm dead certain I know one of the killers—Lafe Polk."

"That sneak-faced brother-in-law of Stroud's? He hasn't been around long. You say you knew him before he came to Ortella?"

Regan nodded again. He explained the circumstances that had led to his following Polk from Elm Crossing, then detailed his capture of the man on the ridge from which Garrett and

Weckler had been shot, ending with Polk's liberation by Stroud in Kelso's office.

"Polk's the weak spot in Stroud's schemes," Regan said. "I could make him talk plenty, if I could get my hands on him. Stroud knows that, of course, and he's backing Polk to the limit, because that way he's protecting himself at the same time."

"What about Ike Kelso, the sheriff?" Ellis asked. "I mean, if you made Polk talk and it came to a real showdown, how do you know Kelso would back you up? Stroud helped to get him in office, and he'll side with Stroud."

"I don't think so," Regan answered. "Not if there's strong evidence against Stroud. Kelso may have used Stroud's help to get in office, but that doesn't mean he's ready to cover up any killings for Stroud—especially cold-blooded killings of decent folks."

ELLIS LOOKED dubious, and noting the expression, Regan went on: "You know Kelso better than I do. What kind of a man would you say he is?"

"Well, lazy...easy-going."

"But not downright mean. Not Stroud's kind, isn't that it?"

Ellis nodded slowly.

"That's what I was leading up to," Regan said. "Kelso will go where the push is hardest. He'll go along with Stroud, if there's no other way out. But I've watched Kelso. He doesn't cotton to dirty work, and his badge means more to him than just a piece of tin that supplies him with grub and a place to hang his hat. If we pushed hard enough, he'd go along with us. And by pushing hard, I mean getting real evidence against Stroud and backing Kelso up to the limit in a fight."

Ellis' eyes glittered with excitement. "Sounds like you have the right idea. If you have, and if you can make it work out like you say, you'll have the thanks of just about everybody in Ortella. Stroud's been throwing his weight around a little too long and a little too often."

"I think I can make it work out," Regan said. "It all depends on me getting hold of Lafe Polk, and I have a plan shaping up to take care of that end."

Ellis rode in silence for a time. Finally he said, "It's none of my business, but maybe you wouldn't mind telling me just what you're doing this for. I mean, taking on the troubles of the Rafter G, and maybe ending up with nothing except a lot of bullet holes."

Regan spoke slowly, his gray eyes fixed on distance. "I guess I'm doing

it because I liked old man Garrett and wanted to lend a hand. And because getting Cassidy's killer is part of it. And the Rafter G is a nice spread, worth taking risks for."

"Too bad Miss Andrea doesn't see it that way. She's been picking on you ever since you came. Looks like she's trying to ride you clear off the Rafter G and out of Ortella."

Regan shrugged. "Can't blame her much. She had the ranch coming to her, and she sort of feels that I cheated her out of it. Complete stranger, too. No manners or refinement like Mr. Darcy."

"Darcy!" Ellis snorted in disgust. "What Miss Andrea sees in that slicked-up dude is beyond me. You know, I figure Cy Garrett left you the Rafter G because he didn't want Darcy to get his hands on it. Darcy ain't cut out to be a rancher. Once he got hitched to Miss Andrea, he'd sell out sure as you were born."

"Garrett had that idea," Regan said. "But I don't think Darcy is going to sit back and let the ranch slip away from him. He's putting himself in cahoots with Stroud."

Ellis jerked around, staring in surprise. "How do you know?"

REGAN TOLD of the meeting between Stroud and Darcy which he had witnessed. He finished, "They both want the Rafter G for different reasons. They went into that hotel to talk it over and most likely cook up a plan. I don't think Miss Garrett knows about it. She wouldn't have anything to do with Stroud."

Ellis fingered his mustache, frowning. "This could work up into something serious. What do you figure to do about it?"

"I have a little scheme shaping up, like I said. Stroud and Darcy being in cahoots is the thing it swings on. I think it's about time to put it—"

The distant, flat report of a rifle cut into Regan's words. Hondo Ellis had stiffened, and now his hand clutched startledly at his side.

"Damn!" he exclaimed. "Somebody's—"

"Ride!" Regan snapped. He sent his horse leaping forward.

Ellis hastily followed. An instant later, the rifle crashed again, the bullet thudding harmlessly into the ground.

Regan and Ellis had been approaching one end of a long, narrow shoulder of land, and it was from the other end of this that the shots had come. With the bulk of the ridge now protecting them from the hidden sniper, Regan drew rein, glancing back at Ellis in concern.

"You hit?"

Ellis explored his side briefly. "Grazed that's all. I was lucky, I reckon." He produced a handkerchief and began folding it to place against the wound.

Regan slipped his gun from his holster and gestured. "The bushwhacker's on the other side of here. If we split up, we might be able to ride him down."

Ellis nodded. "I got a head start on you."

They sent their horses back into motion, taking opposite sides of the ridge.

REGAN RODE swiftly, bent low in the saddle, his eyes peering intently ahead. A grim eagerness showed in his face. Then disappointment appeared. For a sudden clatter of hoofbeats rose in the distance, penetrating through the sounds made by his own mount and that of Hondo Ellis, who was riding parallel to Regan on the other side of the ridge. The sniper evidently had reached his waiting horse and was now hurrying to make good his escape.

Regan urged his mount to greater speed. The end of the ridge appeared, where it merged into the line of hills forming the western end of the Rafter G. The ground rose here, and as he began to ascend the nearest slopes, his eyes caught a flicker of motion above him and some distance ahead. Two riders were momentarily silhouetted against the gray sky as they hurried through a wide hollow between two crests.

Regan snapped a shot after them, a futile shot, as it proved. In another instant, the two riders were gone.

When Regan gained the top of the ridge and reached the hollow, he caught another glimpse of them. They were pelting down a long slope to his right, having gained on him in the time it had taken his mount to climb to this point. They hit the bottom of the slope and disappeared behind trees and brush.

Regan drew rein and waited until Hondo Ellis rejoined him. He caught the other's inquiring glance and shrugged.

"Two of them," he said. "They have too much of a start on us. It would just be a waste of time to go after them."

Ellis eyed the distance to the bottom of the slope from where they sat and nodded reluctantly. "Did you make out who they were?"

"I didn't have them in sight long enough for that. But you can bet they were a couple of Stroud's men."

Regan gestured, and with Ellis at his side, began riding back in the direction from which they had come. Presently he said, "What just happened sort of convinces me that it's time I put my plan to work. I'm going to need your help, Hondo, so I'll tell you what I have in mind."

Regan explained, speaking quietly and swiftly. When he finished, Ellis grinned in admiring approval.

"It's one of the slickest things I ever heard. You can count on me! And that goes for the boys, too—every mother's son of 'em!"

REGAN STRODE into his room at the ranch house, tossing his hat to the bed. He removed his jacket and was unbuttoning his shirt, when he became aware of a slight yet persistent oddness about the room. He peered quickly around him, and then understanding glittered in his gray eyes.

The room had been searched during his absence.

There was no doubt about it. He had anticipated the fact that a search would be made eventually, and he had taken pains to keep certain objects and pieces of furniture placed in such a way that he would instantly know whether they had been moved. The articles were out of their precise alignment now, and it was this that had caught his attention. The searcher had evidently been careful to avoid leaving notice of his presence, but unmistakeable traces remained.

A sardonic grin twisted Regan's mouth. Only the fact of the search interested him. He was not concerned about the title, which had been the item sought. This had been wrapped in a strip of oilskin and placed in a spot where it was not likely to be unearthed.

Regan washed, combed his hair, and donned a clean shirt. Carrying his hat and jacket, he went down to the dining room. He was late for the mid-day meal, and it appeared that Andrea and Darcy had already eaten and gone somewhere, perhaps to watch the rebuilding of the bunkhouse and the other ranch structures which had been destroyed by fire. The rasping of saws and the pounding of hammers drifted in from outside.

A plate had been set out, and a number of covered food dishes stood waiting on the table. Regan ate abstractedly, washing down lukewarm food with swallows of lukewarm coffee.

Finished shortly, he rolled and lighted a cigarette, rose, and began shrugging into his jacket. He was reaching for his hat, when he heard footsteps ascending the porch. They continued to the living room and stopped, and Andrea's soft voice said, "I'll be right with you, Claude."

Regan reached the entrance to the living room in time to see Andrea moving toward the hall stairway, obviously on the way to her room. Darcy stood by the fireplace, immaculately dressed, idly slapping a pair of gloves into the palm of one hand.

BECOMING aware of Regan's presence, the two momentarily became motionless. Their expressions underwent a swift change, turning reserved and cool.

Regan spoke as Andrea turned to resume her ascent of the stairs. "I'd like to talk to you a minute, Miss Garrett."

"I hardly think that there is anything we can talk about, Mr. Regan," she returned. She stood watching him, her violet eyes very plainly holding themselves aloof from what they saw. The cool breeze outside had tumbled the shining black curls about her face and brought a flush of color to her cheeks.

She looked fresh and lovely—yet to Regan as distant and cold as the Moon itself. He took a deep breath past the queer ache that rose in him and said quietly, "I've been considering a certain step, Miss Garrett. I thought I'd mention it to you before I went ahead with it."

"Really? I'm surprised that you should bother."

"Nothing surprising about it. If you'll recall, I told you that I'd discuss important ranch matters with you."

Some of the aloofness left her face, but she seemed wary. "Well, what is so important right now?"

Regan glanced briefly at Darcy, who was watching with an intent and hostile expression. To the girl he said, "I'm thinking of selling about seven-hundred head of cattle, Miss Garrett."

She stiffened. "So you're starting that, are you? I was wondering when you would get around to it. No doubt you'll soon sell the ranch right out from under me. You're getting too high-handed, Mr. Regan."

He shook his head doggedly. "I wouldn't have told you about this if I was. I'd appreciate it, Miss Garrett, if you wouldn't deliberately set yourself to misunderstand everything I do. Let's get the record straight once and for all. Your father trusted me with the Rafter G. I don't intend to go back on that trust. Every move I make will always be for the good of the ranch."

"Then just why do you want to sell the cattle?"

"Because I went over the books the other day, and I found we're soon going to be short of operating money. The work on the ranch buildings is costing plenty. Furthermore, tools and supplies will have to be bought to replace what was lost in the fire. And with certain people putting pressure on us, it's a good idea to have ready cash on hand."

ANDREA NIBBLED thoughtfully at her lower lip. "That's all very well, I suppose, but I know enough about ranching to know that this is hardly a good time to sell cattle. You won't be able to get a good price."

"I think I can," Regan said. "Maybe you haven't heard of the Triple O Syndicate, Miss Garrett, but it's a big ranching outfit, and I have some good contacts with the men who do business with it. They owe me some favors, sort of, and they'll see that I get a good price for the cattle."

Andrea looked thoughtful again. She ran the tips of her slim fingers over the stair rail, glancing at Regan with an air of indecision.

He went on, "Just one thing more, Miss Garrett. I think it would be a good idea to say nothing to anyone about the cattle being sold. The information might get into the wrong hands."

"Abe Stroud's hands, you mean?" Andrea asked.

Regan nodded gravely. "He has reasons to want to keep us from making money. At any other time, I wouldn't bother to keep it quiet, but right now I'd say it's a wise thing to do. You see, I won't be along to help take the cattle in for shipment, and so I'd like to keep down the risks that something might happen to them. I intend to ride on ahead and settle the deal. That way I'll get back to the ranch as fast as possible."

Darcy spoke for the first time. "What makes you think your presence is so invaluable, Regan?" he asked in a jeering tone.

"Take a look outside," Regan answered shortly. "The ranch buildings aren't being put together again because the wind blew them down."

He returned his attention to Andrea. "These arrangements satisfactory to you, Miss Garrett?"

"I don't see that I have much to say about it." She hesitated a moment, looking at Regan, and her expression seemed to change in some curiously indefinable way.

He stood straight and quiet, returning her gaze with steady gray eyes, his weathered, spare features sober. He seemed a different Dan Regan from the travel-grimed stranger who had appeared at the ranch that fateful evening with Garrett and Weckler, one dead, the other dying. He was neat and clean, his clothing brushed and pressed, his dark red hair carefully combed. But even more than this, there was something about his tall figure, something about the rugged planes of his face, that became noticeable for the first time; a quality that compelled liking, even admiration.

IT WAS AS though Andrea had become aware of this—and aware, too, of his steady, gray-eyed regard. Her black lashes fell, and a faint deepening of color rose in her cheeks. And as though she had suddenly found it necessary, she added softly, hastily, "Yes, the arrangements are all right." Then she turned and quickly mounted the stairs.

Regan remained motionless, frowning down at the hat in his hands. After a moment he seemed to remember Darcy, for he lifted his head to glance slowly at the man, the lines of his face smoothing into impassivity.

Darcy was watching him with a sharp, calculating expression, his eyes narrowed and his full lips tight under the thin, pale line of his mustache. For the space of a few heartbeats, he returned Regan's gaze. Then he slapped his gloves against his leg in a gesture that might have been defiance, or merely irritation, and strode crisply to the door.

Regan watched him go, watched as the door closed and as the other's polished boots clattered in their descent of the porch stairs. The sounds seemed to bring to the surface a purpose which until now had been submerged in him. Slowly, deliberately, he put on his hat and stalked in the

direction which Darcy had taken.

Darcy was moving toward the side of the house, slapping the gloves against his leg again. The buggy stood waiting here, hitched and ready He turned and leaned his back against it, scowling. In another second, he became aware of Regan's approach. The scowl faded, leaving his features stiff and wary.

Regan said slowly, "I wanted to have a word with you, too, Darcy."

The other straightened in swift petulance. "I'd prefer not to talk to you, Regan."

He made a motion to turn and walk away, but Regan's hand caught him by the shoulder and swung him with little apparent effort back against the buggy. Darcy jarred against it, momentarily off balance. Slowly he braced himself, tense, a flush spreading through his face.

"I want to talk to you," Regan said. "And you're going to talk to me."

"You leave me alone, Regan!" Darcy's voice was thin with rage. "By God, if you think you're going to push me around—"

"You searched my room," Regan broke in. "I want to know what the idea was, Darcy."

A SHADOW seemed to dim the brightness of the other's fury. "You're crazy. I haven't been anywhere near your room."

"My room was searched," Regan said. "It was searched by somebody who tried to hide his tracks...somebody who lived right in the house. Miss Garrett wouldn't try a sneaking trick like that. Even if she did, she has a woman's eye for the way things are kept, and she'd do a better job of covering up. A man was the one who did the search, a man who didn't expect that another man would keep things fixed in a certain way.

"You searched my room while I was gone this morning, Darcy. You were right in the house. You had plenty of chance. You had something to look for, and you had a big reason to want it. Now admit it."

"I won't do any such thing!" Darcy shrilled. "You're not going to make me—"

Regan shot out a hand. He caught Darcy by the coat front and jerked him forward. He leaned his face close to Darcy's, and the lines of it were drawn into a pattern of danger.

"Admit it, Darcy! I want to know, and I want you to know that I know it!"

Darcy struggled briefly and futilely against the hand that held him. His unspent violence sought release in furious speech.

"All right! All right, damn you! I did it. I searched your room. And why not? You have no real right to the title. You're just a trouble-making bum who took advantage of a dying man."

Abruptly, Regan released his grip. His hand flashed up, and the back of it jarred solidly against Darcy's mouth. Darcy staggered back against the buggy and clung there a moment, dazed.

"I told you to watch your manners," Regan said. "Maybe that will help you to remember."

Darcy shook his head. His face cleared, and an almost mindless malevolence came into it. His outstretched right hand left its supporting grip on the frame of the buggy, groping toward an object lying across the seat—a whip. Suddenly he clutched it and raised it high and leaped at Regan.

Ducking, Regan caught the slash on his upraised forearm. He stepped in, then, and his fist arched up and thudded into Darcy's jaw. Again, Darcy fell back against the buggy, crum-

pling now and sliding to the ground.

"Regan...don't! Stop it!"

ANDREA'S VOICE, sharp with alarm, cutting through the roaring, red-hazed blur. Regan turned and saw the girl on the porch, a hand raised to her throat, her face pale. Then she was running toward him...toward Darcy. She reached the other in a whirl of skirts and bent, cradling his head anxiously in her arms. Only then did she look directly at Regan, her violet eyes snapping with indignation.

"You...you bully!" she accused. "You know very well that Claude's no match for you, yet you deliberately tried to hurt him. I was beginning to think there was something decent about you. I'm glad I found out in time how wrong I was."

Regan said gently, "If you'll take another look, Miss Garrett, you'll notice that your Mr. Darcy is holding a whip. And even so I didn't hit him as hard as I could have done."

"Oh, go away," she said in abrupt weariness. "Please go away."

Regan took a deep breath. Swinging on his heel, he stalked in the direction of the barn.

The incident with Darcy had taken place at a side of the ranch house not easily visible to anyone at the barn or at the various rebuilding sites, and evidently had gone unnoticed. Any sounds had been lost in the construction noises.

Hondo Ellis stood in the barn entrance, coiling a rope. He looked up questioningly as Regan approached.

"You talk to Miss Andrea about selling the cattle?"

Regan nodded. "It's settled. In the morning, we'll start getting the cattle together for shipment. Meanwhile, I'll write out the telegram and have one of the boys ride in and send it."

Ellis leaned closer, his raw-boned features eager. "Darcy hear what you told Miss Andrea?"

Regan nodded again. "He was on hand when I talked to her. Besides, I sort of picked a little ruckus with him afterward, to make sure that he'll do what we've been figuring on."

"I already sent out four of the boys to get up some extra fighting hands from among the neighbors. We'll get 'em, too. Most folks in Ortella will jump at a real solid chance to get rid of Stroud and his killers." Ellis rocked back on his heels, grinning in wolfish satisfaction. "Everything's just about ready."

"And hell's going to bust loose soon!" Regan finished grimly.

REGAN AND Hondo Ellis, together with a group of seven other men, sat around a small fire in a hollow. Among encircling hills. It was dark, with a three-quarter moon floating among ragged patches of cloud, and a cold wind made a dirgelike rustling as it moved through the brush along the slopes.

In keeping with his pretense of riding on ahead of the cattle drive, Regan had been waiting alone in this spot since early that afternoon. Hondo Ellis and the other men, volunteers from among the ranchers and townfolk of Ortella, had joined him here a short time before, as had been previously arranged. Introductions had been performed, and the newcomers had been given time to settle themselves comfortably for the wait ahead. Regan was now launching into an explanation of the reason for these mysterious activities.

"...The whole thing depends on getting definite evidence to show that Stroud was behind the killings of Cyrus Garrett and Gus Weckler," he said. "The only way to get that evidence is to get hold of someone high enough up in Stroud's gang and make

him talk. Someone who know positively that Stroud gave the orders, and who was maybe in on the bushwhackng. Now, the man I have in mind is Lafe Polk, Stroud's brother-in-law. I'm dead certain that Polk is one of the killers. I knew him before he came to Ortella, and I know for a fact that he's a sneaking, shoot-in-the-back killer. And among other things, too, I know Polk will talk plenty when the right pressure is put on him.

"So the real idea behind the cattle drive is to draw out Stroud's men, including and especially Lafe Polk. Stroud had been doing just about everything to make trouble for the Rafter G, and he wouldn't miss a chance to keep Rafter G cattle from getting to market. He'll send his men out to raise hell with them, and maybe even to rustle them clean off.

"Lafe Polk likes little tricks like that. He'd want to be in on the fun—but not if he knew he'd be going against me. He has certain reasons for wanting to keep out of my way. That's why I fixed it up to look like I was riding on ahead to settle the business arrangements...so Polk would be sure to know that I wasn't going to be with the cattle and spoil his chance of having some fun."

"But how would Polk find out about that?" one of Regan's listeners asked.

"He'd find out the same way Stroud would find out about the cattle being shipped. Because there's a jasper at the Rafter G who has gone into cahoots with Stroud for certain reasons of his own. This jasper would like to run me off the Rafter G, and he'd be sure to tell Stroud about every important move I make. I made certain that he heard all the details about the shipment, including the one about me not going along."

A SECOND question was raised by another of the men present.

"How do you know this jasper you're talking about actually told Stroud about the cattle and the rest?"

"He was watched," Regan said. "And he was followed one morning when he got himself a horse and sneaked away from the Rafter G. He rode straight to Stroud's ranch. So there's no doubt about Stroud's knowing what's going on.

"And," Regan went on, his voice turning hard, "there's no doubt that Stroud's doing something about it. I have scouts out in the hills and reporting to me here. Over a dozen of Stroud's men left the Coiled S shortly before dark. Last I heard, they were riding in the direction taken by the Rafter G cattle drive.

"It's easy to figure out what their plan will be. They'll get ahead of the drive and find some place where they can raise the most trouble. Then they'll hole up and wait for the cattle to come along. When they do that, we'll find out about it from the men I have out watching. Our job will be to get on one side of them and box them in. The boys with the cattle will be on the other side. They know the plan, and they'll be ready for action."

Mutters of approval started to rise, but a grizzled, burly man held up his hand in a gesture for silence. "Seems to me that one thing's been forgotten," he told Regan.

"How do you mean?" Regan asked.

"What about Sheriff Ike Kelso? Supposing you do get hold of Lafe Polk and make him talk, how do you know Ike Kelso will back you up? Everybody knows Stroud helped Kelso to get in office, and most likely Kelso wouldn't want to go against him."

"I'm willing to bet anything that I can get Kelso to back me up," Regan

returned. He repeated the argument which he had given Hondo Ellis some days before.

The burly man considered this and finally nodded. The mutters of approval rose again, this time without interruption.

Someone leaned forward to throw more wood on the fire, and as it blazed up brightly, it seemed for the moment to symbolize the emotions of the men gathered around it. There had been doubt and uncertainty, there had been skepticism, if not a little suspicion. Now there was understanding and trust, purpose and determination.

FOR ALMOST a half hour more, the group sat waiting about the fire, smoking and talking in low voices. Regan shifted impatiently, glancing into the shadows beyond the hollow and listening intently.

At last, his eyes lighted. The trotting approach of a horse became audible through the stillness. The rider seemed to know where he was going, and he rode without any attempt at secrecy. But Regan rose as though in some deep, instinctive need for caution, dropping a hand to his holstered gun. The others rose, too, moving away from the fire.

The horse drew close. A voice called softly through the darkness: "It's me. Pete."

"All right," Regan said. "We've been waiting for you." He watched in tense eagerness as the puncher dismounted at the edge of the hollow and strode toward the fire. "They've holed up?"

Pete nodded. "In a canyon not far from here. I know the place. There's a drop of about twenty feet or more to one side of the trail leading out of it. I reckon they're figuring to let the cattle get into the canyon, then spook them into running over the drop." Pete shook his head grimly. "Twenty feet may not sound like much, but with cattle stampeding and falling on top of each other, there wouldn't be a lot left of them... Anyhow, I passed the work on to Dutch, and he's going to tell the boys with the cattle."

"Good!" Regan said. "Now, what we're going to do is pussy-foot around to the end of the canyon where the drop you've mentioned is situated. When the cattle come stampeding at us, we're going to turn them back into Stroud's men. That was the play agreed on, and the other boys with us will know what to do."

Regan kicked earth over the fire. "Hit leather," he said.

"With Pete leading, they rode swiftly into the darkness. The moon came out from behind its tattered screen of cloud, throwing a pale, luminescent radiance over the tumbled land. They rode strung out in file, and the men in the fore were careful to keep the procession moving over soft portions of ground, which would muffle the noise of hoofbeats. The canyon was still a considerable distance away, and Stroud's raiders would have ears only for the cattle approaching the canyon, but Regan was taking every precaution to keep their approach from being revealed.

PRESENTLY Pete raised his hand for a halt. Regan and Hondo Ellis reined in beside him. They stood at the edge of a steep slope that led down into dense shadow. Below them lay a series of broad clefts in the land, as though everything visible had been cut into long patterns of light and darkness.

Pete pointed. "That's the end of the canyon, down there. And that's the drop, over there."

Regan nodded thoughtfully. In the

next instant, he lifted his head to listen. "It's the cattle," he said. "I can hear them coming. We've got to hurry and get ourselves set."

In pairs, they made the painstaking descent of the slope. At the bottom, Regan deployed the men to his satisfaction, then slipped his gun into his hand and took up a position of his own. The rumble of the approaching cattle filled the air now, interspersed with occasional sounds of plaintive lowing, and the nerves of the waiting men wound to bowstring tautness.

The lowing and the rumbling, rising in volume. The sighing of the wind...and then pandemonium.

Cutting sharply into the other sounds rising over and partially submerging them, came the shrieks and yells of men. Gunshots followed in a staccato thunder, adding to the uproar. It was as though a horde of demons had suddenly been unleashed, each bent on creating as much of a fiendish din as could possibly be managed.

The bawling of panic-stricken beasts now joined in. The rumbling had faded momentarily as the herd halted in shock at the first onslaught of sound. Now it rose again and kept rising to a reverberating roar that rolled back and forth in overlapping echoes between the canyon walls. Down the canyon, the herd thundered, in full, maddened flight, that might very well end only when the last terrorized cow had followed its companions to destruction or crippling injury over the cliff. And after them the riotous demons raced, amid a screeching of voices and a crashing of guns.

But the maddened, fear-filled herd was not to be given the negative relief of a plung over the cliff. For as they neared it, still another pack of demons materialized before them, adding their own racket to the already overwhelming maelstrom of sound.

THE CATTLE in the forefront of the stampede came to an abrupt stop, as though a wall had shot up before them. Immediately, the entire mass of plunging bodies was jammed into a writhing tangle as those in the rear threw their as yet unspent momentum into the block, piling up crushingly one against the other.

A part of the uproar faded, too, as the pursuing rider suddenly realized that an unexpected element had risen into the midst of their activities. Their subdued voces called back and forth across the canyon, questioning, filled with a growing alarm.

"It's a trap!" one of them shouted. "Ride to hell out of here!"

The cattle seemed to have the same idea. Slowly, painfully, they had been turning upon themselves, presenting their tails in preparation for abandoned flight away from the second group of howling fiends. Now they got back into motion, gathering speed as they plunged after the riders fleeing back up the canyon.

The Rafter G riders who had been conducting the drive had been warned to keep well to the rear of the heard. When the attack came, they had taken advntage of the confusion to edge back to the canyon entrance. They were gathered there, now, ready and waiting, filled with vengeance.

As the demoralized raiders approached, with the reversed herd now following in their wake, the Rafter G men burst out of concealment. From their midst now rose a new bedlam of voices and gunshots.

In dismay, the raiders drew rein and frntically swung their mounts around....to face the onrushing herd. All coordination and order between them was cast aside in a wild, un-

thinking right for survival. Part sought to flee in the first likely direction that presented itself, others began yelling and shooting at the approaching cattle in an effort to halt them, while the rest threw themselves into panicky battle against the men who had appeared in the canyon entrance.

It was into this bewildered scene that Regan and his group rode, having approached by keeping close to the canyon walls. They were prepared for it, however, and they swung into swift, efficient action.

Mounted men moved with kaleidoscopic turbulence in the shadow-etched moonlight, merging, separating, struggling group against group, individual against indvidual. Yells lifted in triumph and despair. Guns roared, and men fell, and other men leaped and whirled in an ever-changing pattern of struggle. A pattern that soon resolved itself and steadied. Quiet came. The sighing of the breeze was audible again.

The greater part of the cattle stood huddled in bunches along the middle of the cnyon, sagging in fatigue, or shivering in the aftermath of fear. Having their stampede checked a second time, and having once more been turned in upon themselves, had all been too much for them. With nothing of sufficient violence and urgency to put them into motion again, they had simply gathered together to wait for whatever a merciful dawn might bring.

AROUND the canyon entrance stood little groups of men with upraised hands. Men with guns moved alertly between them, some on guard, some searching for hidden weapons, and some already busy with ropes.

Regan was one of the men with guns. Impatiently, he called out, "Any of you boys got Lafe Polk? These men say he was working with them."

"Got him!" a voice answered from a group a short distance away. "I'm getting his hands tied right now."

Regan hurried forward. In another moment, he stood looking down at Polk. He smiled a cold, slow smile. He was breathing heavily. He had lost his hat, and the collar of his shirt had been ripped almost completely away. A dark bruise splotched one cheek. Blood had trickled and now was congealing along his jaw from a spot on his temple where a bullet had grazed him. But now he smiled.

Polk said nothing. He stood with bound arms, looking with a leaden weariness at Regan, his small eyes empty and sick.

"I'm glad to see you, Lafe," Regan said softly. "I got up this little party for you, you see. You and me are going to have a talk together—only you're going to do most of the talking."

"And believe me, you had damn well better talk," added Hondo Ellis, who had come up at this point.

"First things first, Hondo," Regan said. He turned and began issuing crisp orders.

The majority of Rafter G riders were to remain with the cattle, rounding up strays in preparation to resuming the drive in the morning. The others were to aid the volunteers in taking the captured raiders and the wounded of both sides to Ortella. Regan and Elis themselves were to ride on ahead with Lafe Polk.

Shortly afterward, they were mounted and in motion. And during the ride, Polk talked. It had taken very little persuasion to make him do so.

"Yeah, I was one of the two men who beefed Weckler and old Garrett," he admitted hopelessly. "I know I got Weckler, but I ain't sure if I hit Garrett where it was likely to kill him."

"So you say," Regan said. "But the other man, Polk. Who was he?"

"Abe Stroud," Polk said.

REGAN KNOCKED on the door of the room to which the woman boarding house owner had led him. The silence beyond the door remained unbroken. He knocked again.

Finally, bedsprings creaked behind the door, and a querulous voice lifted. "What is it, damn it?"

"Dan Regan. I want to talk to you, Kelso."

An indistinct mutter followed. The bedsprings creaked again, violently, and then there was the sound of bare feet padding across a thinly carpeted floor. Several seconds later, the door opened.

Kelso looked at Regan, his mouse-colored hair rumpled, and his lumpy features twisted in a scowl. Light from a lamp spilled out of the room behind him, into the dim hall. He had evidently taken time to turn on this light and don a pair of trousers over the suit of underwear in which he had been sleeping.

Now, Kelso's eyes sharpened on Regan. His scowl faded, to be replaced by more urgent emotions, chief of which seemed to be curiosity.

"Huh, what happened to you? Looks like you've been in one hell of a fight."

"It was a nice fight while it lasted," Regan said. At Kelso's gesture of invitation, he stepped into the large, untidy room beyond.

Kelso gestured again, this time toward a chair, and strode to the table on which the lamp stood. He picked up a corncob pipe and a package of tobacco. He began to fill the pipe with fumbling fingers, watching Regan as he did so.

"What happened?" he asked at last. "Was it...Stroud?"

"Sort of." Regan leaned forward in his chair. "Let's get around to something else first, Kelso. Your job, and how far you're willing to go with it. Now look, Stroud helped to get you put in office, didn't he?"

"Uh-huh. Reckon I got to admit that, son."

"Does it mean you have to do everything Stroud wants?"

KELSO SHRUGGED in discomfort. He struck a match and lit his pipe, puffing out clouds of blue smoke which veiled his face.

Regan's gray eyes were intent. "I watched you the first time I saw you, Kelso. I got the idea that you don't like to go as far in certain things as Stroud would like you to. I got the idea that you're more than a dummy with a badge."

Kelso said abruptly, "What are you getting at, son?"

"What I'm getting at is that you want to break with Stroud. You don't want to cover up for any of his killings. You want to play the law game the way your badge means it should be played. I'm going to give you the chance."

"But how, son? How?" Kelso gestured in despair. "I ain't got a single soul behind me. Stroud's got a whole crew of gunslicks who'd shoot me if I so much as spit. There's the whole thing in a nutshell."

"Suppose I got you the backing you need?" Regan asked. "And besides this, suppose I got you plain, hard evidence that Stroud and Lafe Polk were the two men who bushwhacked Cyrus Garrett and Gus Weckler. Supposing all this, Kelso, would you go against Stroud? Would you take the chance to be a genuine, honest-to-goodness sheriff and not a dummy with a badge?"

"I damn well would, son," Kelso said fiercely. "Just get me what you say."

"I've got it," Regan told him.

"All right, let's go over this again. I can see that something big has happened, and I reckon you have plenty more to tell. Wait." Kelso turned to a cabinet and produced whiskey bottle and glasses. He filled the glasses with a trembling hand. "Here's to freedom, son!"

Regan nodded and drank, and then, leaning back in his chair, he outlined the sequence of events that had led up to the capture of Lafe Polk and ended with Regan's visit to Kelso. He finished: "Hondo Ellis is keeping Polk under guard right now in the barn at the Rafter G. You ride out there with me, and Polk will repeat what he said about him and Stroud being the two men who killed Garrett and Weckler. When you're satisfied with that, we can return here. By that time, the other hands will be in town with the rest of Stroud's crew that we caught. And when folks see that, when they see you taking a real hand in the game, you'll get plenty of help.

"But we can't lose any time about moving against Stroud. He won't be able to put up much of a fight now, with most of his men headed for jail. That's one of the reasons why I rigged up the whole thing. But we don't want him to find out and light a shuck out of Ortella and get clean away."

Kelso nodded quickly and filled the glasses again. "Let's get moving," he said.

YELLOW LIGHT limned the edges of the barn door as Regan and Kelso rode up. The Rafter G ranch was shrouded with night.

Regan dismounted and waited a moment until Kelso joined him. Then he slid open the barn door and strode into the shadowy, cavernous interior, toward the circle of lamplight several feet beyond the barn entrance.

He stopped very suddenly.

As though from some tremendous, echoing distance, he was aware that Kelso had stopped, too. And then he heard Kelso's voice, thin with shock and horror, and holding a note almost of anguish.

"Great gosh a'mighty!"

Regan could find no voice for his feelings. He was conscious only of a terrible, sickening dismay.

The lamp stood on a long, rough table, throwing its yellow glow over the makeshift bunks against the wall on one side, and over a line of stalls on the other. The gloomy interior of the barn was filled with the scent of hay—and death.

Hondo Ellis was slumped over the table, his hat crushed under his head. He lay very still. On the other side of him, sprawling half over from the long bench onto the floor, was Lafe Polk.

Polk was very still, too. His head had been beaten in with something heavy and sharp, and very little of his features were recognizable.

With an effort, Regan moved. He walked on stiff legs over to Hondo Ellis. He felt the man's hand. Then, moving more swiftly, he placed a palm over the other's heart He nodded. He examined Ellis' head briefly and straightened up.

"Hondo's alive," he said. "He was hit over the head hard, but he's still alive."

Kelso was staring down at what was left of Polk. He asked plaintively, "Now who do you suppose did that?"

"I'll answer that question!" a heavy voice said abruptly.

Regan whirled. Standing at the near end of the line of stalls, a leveled gun in his hand, was Stroud. Behind him were the two gunmen with whom Regan had had his encounter in Ortella. The one he had wounded

still had bandages bulking up under his shirt, and his hard eyes were venomous as they fixed on Regan.

These latter two followed behind Stroud as he stalked slowly forward. And behind them came...Darcy.

STROUD STOPPED and fixed his eyes on Kelso. "You wanted to know who killed Lafe. There's your man." He pointed at Regan. "This snake killed Lafe...killed him trying to make him confess to something that wasn't true. Then he sneaked into town and told you some lying story. Whatever it is, it's just a trick to cover up Lafe's murder."

Stroud made a bitter gesture. His fleshy face was bleak and cold. "You're the sheriff, Ike. Do your duty. Arrest this killer."

Kelso glanced at Regan, his lumpy features bewildered. "What you got to say for yourself, son? This could have happened like Abe says, you know, everything you told me just being a story you put together."

"I have a question to ask," Regan said. "How did you find out about this, Stroud?"

"Darcy, here, rode in and told me," Stroud said shortly. "I rode back with him, and we just got into the barn when we heard you coming."

"What do you know about the murder, Darcy?" Regan demanded.

The other straightened nervously. "I heard you and Ellis ride back to the ranch with the other man...Lafe Polk. I hadn't been able to sleep and was sitting on the edge of my bed. Well...I wondered what was going on. So after a while I dressed and went out to have a look inside the barn. As I walked up, I heard Polk talking. He...he was begging you not to kill him, Regan. He also said he wasn't going to confess to anything he didn't do. Then there was a kind of slapping sound, and Polk's voice stopped."

Darcy breathed jerkily and went on, "I looked into the barn through a crack in the wall. Polk was lying there on the floor, dead. And you, Regan, were holding an axe that the carpenters had been using.

"After that, you had a quarrel with Ellis. He said he didn't want to be a partner to the murder, and that you had better give yourself up, or get away from Ortella. You hit him with the axe, too, and killed him."

"There!" Stroud said, turning to Kelso. "What more proof do you need?"

"WAIT A minute!" Regan said. "There's one thing wrong with Darcy's story. And it's that Ellis *isn't* dead. The man who hit him didn't hit hard enough. When Ellis comes around, he'll testify that Polk was alive when I left the ranch. He'll testify that there was no quarrel between us."

"Then you and Ellis must have arranged all this as a blind!" Darcy shouted shrilly.

"We didn't," Regan said. "What happened, Mr. Darcy, is that you heard us return to the ranch, all right. And you came out to the barn. But you didn't see anyone kill Polk. Polk was alive when I rode out after Kelso. What happened was that you sneaked into the barn when Ellis started to doze. You hit him with an axe you had picked up somewhere, and then you killed Polk. And you killed him because it was your last chance to get hold of the Rafter G. You could frame the murder onto me and get me out of the way. Otherwise, I would catch a couple of real killers, and you would lose the help you were figuring on."

"You're mad!" Darcy cried. "You're

trying to lie your way out of this, Regan! And it won't work!"

"Won't it?" Regan asked quietly. "Then how do you explain the blood-stains on your coat, Mr. Darcy?"

Darcy stiffened and stared down at the garment, clutching at it with his hands as though to conceal something from view. Then, in the next instant, he caught himself. But it was too late. His movements had betrayed him.

Stroud said furiously, "Why, you rotten, lying—"

His effeminate features twisting in terror, Darcy turned to run. He almost reached the barn door, when the blast of Stroud's gun caught him and stopped him and knocked him rolling to the floor.

Regan seized that instant to kick sharply against the table, upsetting the lamp and sending it crashing to extinction. The barn was plunged into blackness.

He had marked the positions of Stroud and the two gunmen and now from memory he drew his gun and fired, shifted the muzzle, and fired again. He heard his first bullet strike flesh, and he darted silently to one side and felt the cold breath of something swift past his cheek as brightness stabbed at him out of the dark.

He fired at the flash, and in the next instant another gun roared near him as Kelso swung into action. The roar was answered. Regan fired at the second flash, and then flame jetted at him, and he felt a blow against his side. He staggered and heard Kelso's gun roar again. Then, abruptly, there was silence.

In the silence, a man fell heavily to the floor. A second man stumbled and dropped and drew a sobbing breath and then was quiet.

There was silence again...silence that remained unbroken for long, labored minutes.

Regan crouched and waited, holding his side. He heard a rustle and then a thump as something hit the floor.

Silence.

A match scratched and sputtered to life. Kelso stood holding it and peering anxiously about him. Finally he said, "Got to get that boot back. Only comfortable pair I have."

"Damn the boot," Regan said. "What about Stroud and the others?"

Kelso struck another match and investigated briefly. "Dead, of course. How's that for shooting in the dark? I have a knack for it, kind of."

Hondo Ellis' voice said, "Hey, what's going on?"

* * *

FINISHED with the bandage she had fastened against Regan's side, Andrea turned away and began to gather up the articles she had been using. Her face was bloodless and drawn, and faint red circles marked her eyes.

Regan lay on the sofa in the ranch house living room. Hondo Ellis sat in a chair nearby, his elbows on his knees, looking cheerful despite a headache. Kelso stood to one side, puffing at his corncob pipe. The two and alternated with Regan in telling Andrea all that had happened. They had gone cautiously over the circumstances leading to Darcy's death in an effort to spare her further pain But their efforts, as it appeared now, had been unnecessary. Her reaction had been due more to the shock of what had happened than to any real sense of loss.

Now, holding her burden, she seemed prepared to leave the room. Instead, she hesitated and glanced once more at Regan. "You really ought to be in bed," she said.

"Reckon you're right." Regan swung his legs stiffly over the sofa, wincing at the wound in his side.

Andrea hastened to set down the articles she had just picked up. "Here. Let me help you. Take my arm."

Kelso caught Ellis' eye, winked, and jerked his head toward the door. "We got work waiting for us, Hondo," he said with unnecessary volume. "Better pitch in, eh?"

"No time like right now," Hondo agreed.

They strode outside, Kelso rubbing a cuff across the badge on his coat and drawing vigorously at his corncob.

Regan reached his room safely, though it seemed much too quickly. He settled himself gingerly on the edge of the bed and then smiled brief reassurance at the girl.

"This is fine, Miss Garrett. Thanks." He hesitated, and as she turned to leave, he added hurriedly, "I want you to know I'm sorry about ...about what happened."

"I hope you don't mean that you're sorry for me," she said. "I consider it a lesson—a lesson in what makes a gentleman and what doesn't." She seemed about to leave again, then hesitated, too. "Mr. Regan, do you intend to remain at the ranch?"

"Well, it's a nice ranch. I guess I'd like to...if I could walk around the house in my stocking feet and not use napkins."

"I'll burn them," Andrea said. "The napkins, I mean."

THE END

"Bob Wahr"

★ By JON BARRY ★

THERE IS nothing new about the wars between the established cattlemen and the "squatters" or the "nesters". It is an oft told tale producing some of the most heroic and some of the most despicable events in the history of the cow country. It started with a chain of mild events.

The railroads began bringing settlers in large numbers into the Western territories. It was not altruism on the part of the railroad barons either. They realized that the more people in the lands through which they passed, the more freight, and consequently the more business for them. And so settlers by the tens of thousands began herding westward to take advantage of the Homesteaders' Act, to get land and farms and to create a new life for themselves. At about the same time, the "Yankee" invention of barbed wire, that infernal creation of the devil, came into being. Cowboys called it "bob wa-ar" or "bob wahr", but by any name it was anathema. It cut cattle and horses. It blocked favorite trails; it changed the vast open spaces into definite plots of land. It was the curse of the cattleman.

The wars that took place between the squatters and the cattlemen almost invariably started over wire-cutting and water rights. The cowmen would simply cut the barbed wire wherever they needed to drive cattle through, and stampeded into the ground vast acreages of crops. Also, the cattlemen fenced in any available waterholes. Without water, a man was helpless. Controlling the water meant controlling the land.

The nesters had only one recourse, especially since some of the States' governments, as in Texas, for example, sympathized strongly with the cattlemen. That recourse was the rifle and the six-gun. The fighting that flared up was effectively a miniature war. As everyone knows now, the nesters won, and this does not point out the morality of the fight or the justness of their cause. Those weren't the reasons. They won because it was an evitable technological step, their introduction of farming into the land, and all the cattlemen in the world could not have stopped what amounted to a law of nature.

But before the bitter feuding ended, there were plenty of dead men on both sides. Texas went so far as to encourage its cattlemen to take advantage of the Homesteaders' Act by helping each cowhand working for a boss to buy up the land. Thus, the land actually belonged to one man. It is said in an old story that there was one old cattleman who said that he didn't want all of the land, just whatever bordered his'n!

Even today, out the Southwest way, you can hear griping against the "bob wahr", but it isn't too loud. After all, cattle have to be fenced in, too!

TEXAS SOUP HAULERS

★ By Linda Rose ★

THERE were some very picturesque figures among the men who helped make our West. The cowboys, the cattlemen, and the settlers themselves were for the most part colorful, exciting characters. But in addition, there was another group—men who weren't cowboys and who wouldn't know one end of a horse from another, who weren't interested in sunsets or in land or in cattle or in western friendliness. They were men who had but one thing on their minds—and that was oil.

A certain category of these oilmen might be called elite. Certainly, they deserved recognition. These were the famous "soup-haulers". Soup was nitroglycerine, the powerful liquid explosive designed for blasting or "shooting" wells. Its transportation was a ticklish problem. Nitro is extremely sensitive to shock, even when it has been desensitized, and to handle it takes nerve. To transport it in the quantities it was used—gallons—required truck-drivers whose nerves were like iron, whose eyesight was as keen as an eagle's—and who didn't have a guilty conscience.

The soup was carried on the back of a truck in five gallon cans which were carefully guarded against leakage. For such a truck to have a slight leak—and friction would do the rest—then blooie! No more truck, no more driver. Explosions of soup trucks were common, and when they occured, very little was left. In one instance, the only part of the driver found was his false teeth, and these were more than a mile away!

In any event, the men who handled this powerful explosive thought of themselves in as separate and as distinguished a category as say, cowboys, or gunmen. And they were looked on in that light. Every time they set foot in a truck or wagon carrying the fluid, they knew that their lives were governed by pure chance. Too hard a bump, too hot a day, too much static electricity in the air—any one of these things—and powie!—up in the air would go everything. But these were the men who made our modern internal combustion engine age possible. Without oil, where would our economy be? Most of the men were Texans—another laurel to that state which is noted for its hardy breed of men.

TRAIN-ROBBERY BUNGLE

★ By Glenn Strator ★

WE ALWAYS hear long and lavish tales about the successful lawbreakers, the ones who "get away with a fortune." But what about the many who have hit the crooked trail and have been unable to make their misdeeds pay?

Consider the case of Grant Wheeler, a thirty dollar a month cowpoke who decided that he wanted to make money a lot faster than that. Going into business, he picked out a partner, Joe George by name. Together, they decided their first venture would be the hold-up of a Southern Pacific train near Wilcox, Arizona. And they were going to be different, for it is a fact learned by hard experience from the James boys down, that the best way to rob a train is with five men. A train is too big to watch all over without plenty of help. Successful train robbers learned this the hard way. But Wheeler and George were going to do better.

They stopped the train, boarded it, and while they were taking hold of the fireman and the engineer, the express messenger escaped with all the money. Not knowing what had happened, they blew open the door of the baggage car safe—and found nothing, because the explosion scattered housands of Mexican pesos all over the right of way. It was a fiasco! Furthermore, they were identified by leaving behind a quirt and a spur.

They decided on another try. This time, in New Mexico, they stopped and boarded a train. By strange coincidence, it was the same train they had robbed before! In their excitement and haste, they cut off the mail car instead of the baggage car where the valuables were. They decided not to play with the U. S. Mails because that would mean Federal prosecution. The second job was botched as badly as the first. Wheeler and George were amateurs—and how!

An officer detailed to catch them finally ran them down. That is, he caught up with Wheeler.

George managed to part company with Wheeler and he escaped successfully, never being heard of again.

Wheeler was hiding in a gulch when the officer ran him down. He remained hidden despite the cries of the sheriff to give himself up. The lawman figured on getting help, for it sure looked like there was going to be a gun-battle. Racing by the gully, the officer just managed to peer into it. At the sme time he heard a shot—and there was Wheeler, lying stretched out on his face with a bullet through his head. He had lived up to his boast not to be caught alive. What a waste of time and effort his frustrated job turned out to be!

THE END

The Memoirs of John Shevlin

The Case of The Dead Detective

I HAVE BEEN dead for thirty-six years—supposedly. In September of 1913, "John Shevlin" was shot in the back of the head, a few miles from Colome in Tripp County, South Dakota, and he died instantly.

In support of this statement, there is the testimony of some of the toughest, most bloodthirsty outlaws who ever shot down an innocent bystander in cold blood. Ben Kilpatrick —Butch Cassidy—Harvey Longbaugh —Bill Carver—Short-Leg Johnny Klein. Definitely the kind of boys you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley with a stray buck in your pocket.

They made up the famous Hole-In The-Wall gang of Wyoming. Some of them are dead now, and the rest are believed to be in South America.

The Hole-In-The-Wall gang were so named because of their hideout in the Jackson Hole country of Wyoming. That place was an outlaw's dream of heaven. A lush, natural valley, cut off from the world by high cliffs on all sides with only one entrance.

This entrance was a narrow passage between two cliffs, at either end of which two men with long-guns could hold off a regiment.

Originally, this land had been the ranch of Short-Leg Johnny Klein. Klein was a bravo who could boast of two separate careers. For some ten years prior to 1895, he had been a successful rustler in Texas. But at that time, a group of ranchers—tired of losing cattle to Johnny and his boys—got a strong rope and started circulating. They went round and round until Johnny and his boys ended up in the middle.

There was a pitched battle in which some men were killed and Johnny had his left leg almost shot off. He escaped, however, and, as he rode away he heard the rope sing as it jerked taut above the body of one of his men.

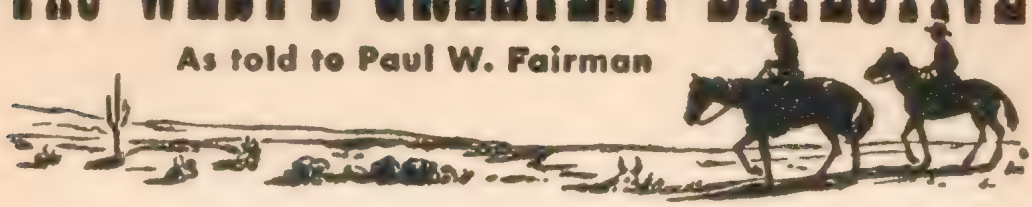
The dying gurgle of that man must have stayed in Johnny's ears for a long time, because he became a reformed son. His leg shrunk down to the point where he had to fasten an iron extension on it to reach the ground.

He left Texas then, went north, and found the spot in the Jackson Hole country which later became known as the Hole-In-The-Wall. Laying out a spread there, he became an honest rancher.

And then Ben Kilpatrick came along. Ben hadn't wasted any time in reforming, and the advantages of Johnny's spread were quite obvious to him.

The WEST'S GREATEST DETECTIVE

As told to Paul W. Fairman



It didn't take him long to "unreform" Johnny. Maybe Klein was tired of being honest, anyway. Kilpatrick immediately set about forming one of the most infamous gangs the west ever knew.

They began with cattle, running them into the Hole-In-The-Wall, blotting the brands and moving them out at their leisure. When a steer was herded into that pocket of land, it was a gone steer.

But Ben Kilpatrick, the acknowledged leader of the outfit, wasn't satisfied with such uneventful larceny. Neither was his gang of cutthroats. These men were natural murderers, and the lack of violent activity palled on them. It is on record that Bill Carver once growled a complaint, "Ain't killed nobody in almost a year!"

So the boys branched out. They cracked the Talon Wyoming Bank for $10,000, leaving a dead cashier behind. They raided the ranch of Tom Bayfield, in southwest Wyoming, and tortured the rancher until he bought his life back with $7,000 he had hidden. They made depredations so savage and numerous, that westerners sobered and grew nervous when the Hole-In-The-Wall gang was mentioned.

One of the most exceptional things about them was that there was never any inner friction among them. Any lawman versed in his work would naturally expect such a gang to eventually break themselves up, provided the law did not do it for them. By every average, there had to be some killings right inside of the gang itself. But there never were, and this must be attributed to Ben Kilpatrick's powerful personality. He held these trigger-happy scoundrels together the way a school teacher controls her pupils.

You may wonder how come such a gang was allowed to flourish and prosper for so long. The answer is, probably for the same reason that the modern Al Capone was allowed to go his way for such a length of time.

Fear.

There were attempts to stop the Hole-In-The-Wall gang, but they were half hearted, because the law in the west during that period depended to a great extent upon the citizens themselves. Every honest man would have liked to have laid Ben Kilpatrick and his boys by the heels. But each one of them knew that in case of failure, there would be vengeance raids upon individuals.

But there is a saturation point, and the Hole-In-The-Wall gang finally reached it. Their Waterloo was a train robbery.

As a Great Northern Express was leaving Malta, Montana on the afternoon of July 3, 1901, the conductor, Andrew P. Smith, saw a man standing on the forward end of the mail car. Smith ordered him back into the coach, rearward.

An ordinary train robber probably would not have proceeded from here on, feeling that his plans had been disrupted. But Ben Kilpatrick, who

was the object of Smith's orders, told Smith he wouldn't live long if he didn't mind his own business. Smith looked at the .45 Kilpatrick drew, and conceded that the man was no doubt right.

So Smith, who had the sheriff of Valley County, Montana as a passenger, went back and appealed to the Law, leaving Kilpatrick on the front platform. The sheriff said he'd be glad to oblige. Have the engineer stop the train at Exeter, the next siding, and he'd personally throw the bum off.

That made Smith happy, very happy. So when the proper time came, he pulled the cord. But the train went right on past Exeter. It was indeed strange that an engineer would ignore an emergency stop signal. Unheard of. Smith pulled the cord again. The train seemed to pick up speed.

By the time the train had reached a spot some three miles east of Wagner, Montana, the air brakes were applied and it ground to a halt. But only because it suited Ben Kilpatrick's plans to have it do so. Immediately after his brush with Smith, Kilpatrick had climbed over the tender and into the cab with the engineer. It had been Kilpatrick with his .45, not Smith and his bell cord, who had been dictating the stop-and-go policy of the train.

So the train pulled up exactly where Kilpatrick wanted it to, and was suddenly surrounded by armed men. The cry went up instantly among the passengers. The Hole-In-The-Wall gang! This was their territory—their country—and no other gang would dare move in.

Every member of the gang was there. While Kilpatrick and another cutthroat dynamited the safe in the mail car, the rest of the gang staged a wild west show outside. Fortunately, they must have been in an amiable mood, because they didn't aim to kill They restricted their activities to the point of keeping the passengers inside of the train. Anything poked out of a window got potted.

Gertrude M. Smith, of Watomah, Wisconsin, put her arm out. When she pulled it back in, a bullet hole had been added. A traveling auditor for the road, George A. Douglas, stopped another bullet with his left arm. Brakeman Whiteside, who jumped off the train, jumped right back on again with a shattered left shoulder.

By the time the passengers had learned to stay inside, the raid was over. The Hole-In-The-Wall gang were off to Wyoming with around $200,000.

Nice pay for fifteen minutes work.

But they were riding toward the end of their trail. The train limped back to Wagner and, within half an hour, the Northern Pacfic had thrown its financial weight behind the fight for law and order. They started with an immediate offer of $5000 for the bodies—in identifiable condition—of each of the outlaws.

Five thousand dollars was a lot of money in those days. A man could retire on it. Also, the public had finally become fed up. Three posses started in pursuit. When they pulled up in front of the narrow entrance to the Hole-In-The-Wall, the three posses had been augmented until they formed quite an army.

The gang inside showed every intention of defending themselves. There were a few attempts at storming which were thrown back with casualties. But the outside forces became more stubborn. They weren't going to leave, this time, until the job was done. If there was no weapon with which they could pierce the hideout, they'd squat there until science invented one. That was their mood.

The end came when the gang apparently lost faith in the security of their bastions, and made a break for it. They thundered out of the narrow passage, counting on the element of surprise, and were dropped from their horses like so many clay pipes in a shooting gallery. Seven were killed. Then the possemen stormed on inside.

They found the place deserted. Also, they found added evidence of Ben Kilpatrick's almost uncanny wisdom. He was not inside the Hole-In-The-Wall. Neither was he among the fallen cutthroats outside. Obviously, he'd never returned to the place after the Great Northern holdup.

Nor did they find the four other men whose names are noted in the second paragraph of this story. Evidently, there had been a splitup after the robbery. Some of the thugs chose to return to the hideout, but the others must have felt a premonition that their cozy game was up.

About a month later, Short-Leg Johnny Klein was spotted in a Montana saloon, and was summarily strung up by a lynching party. That rope, long overdue from Texas, finally caught up with him. But he died close-mouthed, giving no hint as to the whereabouts of his late companions.

So there it stood. Nothing was heard of the rest of Kilpatrick's band, and the case went dead. It stayed dead for a year. Then it came alive again in the old Mechanic's Bank in St. Louis, Missouri.

One morning, during the month of June, 1902, a local jeweler entered the bank to make a deposit. Among the bills he presented, was a twenty dollar bill. Victor Jacquemin, the receiving teller, didn't like the looks of that bill. He checked a list of numbers in his cage, and then led the jeweler toward the cashier's office.

Who'd given him the bill? Why, a fine looking gentleman with a distinct western accent and an attraction for diamonds. It had been a part of the payment for a gem-studded watch.

Did the jeweler know that this bill, together with a lot of others, had been taken from a blown safe in a Great Northern mail car? No, he hadn't the least idea.

The bank contacted the Secret Service. They in turn got in touch with William Desmond, Chief of Detectives in St. Louis. I was a detective sergeant attached to the St. Louis force at that time, and Desmond called me in.

"It looks as though Ben Kilpatrick's in town," he told me.

That didn't hurt my feelings. Ben Kilpatrick would be a pretty good pinch; a pinch that wouldn't hurt my record a bit.

I asked for a detective named George Williams, whom I knew was a good man, and we started wearing out our shoes.

Leg work. Up and down, round about and back again. Leg work. The curse of law enforcement. We figured that Kilpatrick would stick pretty close to the tenderloin district, so we went to work there. But the tenderloin of St. Louis was a sizeable section at the turn of the century, and we had to cover a lot of ground. You'd be surprised how many saloon keepers in town had not seen a man even faintly resembling Ben Kilpatrick. If I'd had a glass of beer in every saloon we visited, I wouldn't have sobered up for five years.

It took three days to hit pay dirt. In a gin-mill on Chestnut near 21st Street, I varied the routine and asked the barkeep about twenty dollar bills. Did he have any in the register? He didn't.

Just then, a porter in a white coat walked in the front door. He was

carrying a tray. He stepped up beside Williams and me and tossed a twenty dollar bill on the bar. He said, "Four bottles of beer. Take it out of there and let me have some singles."

I reached over and picked up the bill. It was nice and new. The property of the U. S. Government. "Where you from?" I asked the porter.

The barkeep cut in: "He works in the cat house next door."

A few more questions got us the information we wanted. We put the porter on ice, and I sent in a call for help. Out came Guion, Brady, and Burke, on the double. All good men.

We decided to play it as cagey as we could, so we entered the establishment next door under the guise of five characters on a shirt hunt with a few under our belts. Brady acted the happy back-slapping drunk and led the parade.

We barged through the place, and found Ben Kilpatrick at a table in a rear room having drinks with three women.

Brady yelled for drinks for the house, and Burke acted the good pal who tried to drag him out. Brady wouldn't go. We all rallied around to help Burke, circling and milling close to Kilpatrick's table. Kilpatrick frowned and stood up.

We nailed him fast from two sides, sent him to the floor and frisked him, finding a loaded .38 revolver on his hip.

After the first reaction of surprise, he went cold on us. Looking into his narrowed eyes, I could almost see his mind working. He was planning a break.

Seeking to forestall any such move, and to throw him off balance in general, I hauled back and kicked him in the shin with everything I had.

He came to his feet like a raging bull and we got the cuffs on him.

That kick was what got me murdered—supposedly—eleven years later.

But, at the moment, I wasn't worried about that. We took him in. Back at headquarters, he really froze up. We got as much information out of him as we'd have gotten from a totem pole. He refused to give.

However, we had something to go on—a key to a hotel room. It was obviously that, but he'd torn the number tag off.

We went legging it again and placed the key, finally, at the La-Clede Hotel on Chestnut and 6th Streets. We described Ben Kilpatrick and the clerk gave us his room number from memory. He said that Kilpatrick had been visited by several men, but he didn't know who was in the room at the moment.

We went up there really loaded for bear. Five of us. I knocked on the door and stepped aside. A .45 slug could rip through the panel and do my anatomy a lot of damage. Nothing happened. I knocked again.

As long as Kilpatrick had had the key, the room was probably empty. But that wasn't a certainty. And being in charge, it was my duty to find out. That meant hitting the door with all I had. I can't say I was overjoyed at the prospect of possibly throwing myself against the barrels of several guns, but it had to be done.

With a revolver in one hand and my men grouped behind me, I turned the knob and hit the panel with my shoulder. The door flew open. I landed inside on the balls of my feet, ready for anything.

Nothing happened. A woman sat on the edge of the bed, staring coldly at me. She had no weapon and made no move.

We took her to headquarters in the old Four Courts Building, but she refused to talk. She and Kilpatrick

were two of the most uncooperative prisoners I ever dealt with. She was identified, however, as Laura Bullion, who was alleged to have been, at one time, the wife of Bill Carver.

Ben Kilpatrick was placed on trial for the Great Northern train robbery, and drew fifteen years in Atlanta. They also found a charge to place against the Bullion woman.

Some of the stolen money—$90,000 of which we found in a satchel in Kilpatrick's room at the LaClede—was unsigned currency routed to a Helena, Montana bank. It was proven that the Bullion woman forged some of the bank officer's signatures thereon. She got a ten year sentence for forgery.

But none of the other Hole-In-The-Wall desperados were ever apprehended. Later, we learned on excellent authority that Cassidy, Longbaugh, and Carver, went to South America. But that was eleven years later. After they'd avenged my insult to their chief—that of kicking him in the shins. In the meantime, they kept their noses clean.

After Kilpatrick was sentenced, he made a statement, the gist of which went like this: "I have no grudge against any officer of the law who was involved in my capture, except one—that man Shevlin. He kicked me when I lay on the floor. To a Texas born man, that is an unforgivable insult, to be wiped out with blood. I'll get Shevlin if it's the last thing I ever do."

I forgot the incident, but Kilpatrick evidently didn't. Time passed. I left the St. Louis police force and went to Tripp County, South Dakota, into the Rosebud country, where I was practicing law and publishing a newspaper. I left there early in the year 1913.

More time passed. Ben Kilpatrick got out of jail, and was killed a year later while holding up a Southern Pacific train near Sanderson, Texas. The proud criminal met an inglorious end. A Wells Fargo Express messenger smashed his head in with the heavy end of an ice mallet.

In 1926, I was back in St. Louis, and dropped in to see the boys at the Four Courts. Possibly I'd still find a familiar face. There were none, but later I met Ray Taylor, a retired detective. He asked me if I remembered the Kilpatrick case.

I said, "Yes, of course. Ben got his in Texas, I understand."

"That's right," Taylor replied. "And I'll bet he died happier thinking that you were dead—that the kick in the shins you gave him had been evened up."

"How so?"

Taylor looked surprised. "You mean you don't know?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've been in the east—out of touch."

"Well, I'll be damned!" Taylor squinted at me. "It was all over the police department here. I supposed one of the boys wrote you. Remember a man named Dibble? Henry Dibble?"

"Can't say that I do."

"You were up in the Rosebud country in South Dakota. You had a tan car."

"Oh, sure. I sold it to Dibble. He was a real estate man there. I sold him the car when I left."

"You sold him his death warrant."

"Come again."

"When Laura Bullion got out of jail, she spent a year trying to locate you. When she found you, up there in South Dakota, she went to Texas and got three of Ben's old Hole-In-The-Wall gang—Butch Cassidy, Harvey Longbaugh, and Bill Carver—and sent them up there after you. Evidently, one of the main points of

identification she gave was that you drove a car they could spot without any trouble.

"They went up to South Dakota and killed a man named Henry Dibble. Then they started the word back to Ben along the grapevine and high-tailed it for South America. He was supposed to join them there when he got out."

This rocked me back on my heels. "Why, good Lord! That's too hard to believe. Somebody's pipe dream."

Taylor shook his head. "Absolutely not. This man Dibble led a blameless life. He didn't have an enemy in the world. It was a murder without motive, and there are no such murders. He was shot in the back of the head while he was riding down a country road in a car they thought belonged to you.

"They headed for South America so fast, they never knew they made a mistake. The murder wasn't important enough to get into the papers out of South Dakota. They went away thinking they'd avenged Ben. The stool pigeons here in St. Louis who gave us the story and sent it along to Ben, thought it was you with your name changed because you were afraid of the gang."

I could think of nothing to say except, "Well, I'll be damned!"

So, if a copy of this issue of MAMMOTH WESTERN should happen to reach South America, and should just happen to get into the right hands—a million to one shot—I've got a message for any of three thugs down there who may still be above ground: You killed an innocent, unoffending man thirty-six years ago in South Dakota. And if you haven't paid for it yet, you will some day...

THE END

Editor's Notes: The next story from John Shevlin's casebook. *The Case of the Man Called 'Brain'*, appears in the September 1949 *MAMMOTH WESTERN*.

"Shoot First . . Then Talk!"

★ **By L. A. BURT** ★

ED AND BAT Masterson were certainly two of the most famous names associated with Dodge City, that rip-roaring hell-hole which was used as a railhead for cattle driven up from Texas. Ed and Bat had to control the fierce Texan cowhands who loved nothing better than putting a bullet in a man. Yet, controlling the Texans without driving them from using the town as a cattle center, wasn't easy. The only thing a Texan respected was a sixgun. Ed found this out too late.

At a dance hall called the Lone Star, a fellow named Moore had just fairly won forty dollars from a liquored-up cowboy named Bob Shaw. With a curse, Shaw pulled a gun on Moore and told him to fork over. Ed Masterson saw the event and decided to intervene. He commanded the polluted Shaw to drop his gun. Shaw ignored the order and Ed reached out to pistol-whip the recalcitrant cowboy. Ordinarily, a pistol-whipping will knock out the toughest hombre, but Shaw failed to drop under the blow, and instead, cooly turned and fired. The bullet hit Ed squarely in the right arm. Calmly, he changed his sixgun from his right hand to his left, and cut loose, putting two bullets into the astonished Shaw. Bat Masterson witnessed the incident. He was worried at his brother's carelessness in coming so close to getting his brains blown out. That his worry was justified, was borne out by the succeeding events. And it ended with death.

Less than a year later, Ed tangled with a couple of tough Texans. Again, it was a case of talking first and shooting later. Too bad for Ed—but he died with three slugs in him. By sheerest chance, again Bat happened to see the incident and he succeeded in dropping both Texans before they knew what had happened.

Ed Masterson was not the only law officer to die because he didn't follow the unwritten code of the west. A gun-toting man is a man who's going to use that weapon. Why take chances? If you're going to question a man, be sure that you can drop him at the first move. Ed Masterson found

this out the hard way. The fundamental code seems to have been embodied in the homely advice, "Do your shooting first; then talk!" Those who didn't follow this precept, regardless of all the romantic junk about giving a man a chance to draw, did not live to talk afterwards.

The six-shooter was a great leveler, that is obvious. But unless it was used right, it didn't mean much. That is one of the reasons why, if you try and find out what happened in so many of the old gun battles, you fail to get much information. Even lawmen don't like to say that they shot first—and then talked. It doesn't sound very chivalrous. But it was the way things were done. And Dodge City, Tombstone, and a host of other towns can testify to the truth.

Deadly Silence

★ **By FRAN FERRIS** ★

IT IS A definite fact that when a Westerner makes noise, you're safe. It's when he's quiet that you want to watch out. Barking dogs seldom bite. Nowhere else was this as true as on the Western plains. It was characteristic of cowboys, cattlemen, and all the other hardy folk of the prairie to make a big racket when their intentions were friendly. In a country where a shot could come from anywhere—and often did—it payed to announce your intentions in a loud voice, especially if they were peaceful. It was an Indian take-off.

The Indian was not at all dangerous when he was noisy. It was when he was silent, when he couldn't be heard or seen, that the veteran prospector or cowman would keep alert, feeling the uneasiness in his bones. That was always the way of the hunter.

The whispering stranger, the quiet-lipped unknown, the soft-spoken lawman, meant business—deadly business. Men who live dangerously generally cut up when they're out for a good time. They make noise and don't care whom it bothers. But when the danger time comes, then silence and quiet is the order of the day. Besides, they've got something that speaks louder than words, and a lot more authoritatively—the greatest convincer of all—a nice bone-handled sixgun!

They Lived Through The Winter

★ **By A. MORRIS** ★

IN THE autumn of 1866, two wagon trains slowly progressed along the difficult trails of western Nebraska. The wagons were ox-drawn, and laden with freight for points in the mountains, having come from the Missouri. But the start had been made too late for that trip. Winter descended earlier than expected, with a violence and thoroughness that stopped the freighters from proceeding any further. The men in charge of the train knew they could not expect to get through until the following spring, and they had to make the best of the situation, even though it meant taking a loss.

They found sheltered places for the wagons loaded with valuable merchandise, covered and secured them as well as they could from the ravages of heavier weather to come, and hoped that the goods could be recovered after the winter was over. If the Indians didn't find the stuff, there was a good chance that most of it would come through the winter in usable shape.

The main loss which they expected to suffer was that of the oxen, which could not be driven back through the blizzards and deep snow, but would have to be abandoned to die from cold and hunger. Since there seemed no other alternative, the oxen were turned loose, and the men rode their horses back to report to their employers what they had done.

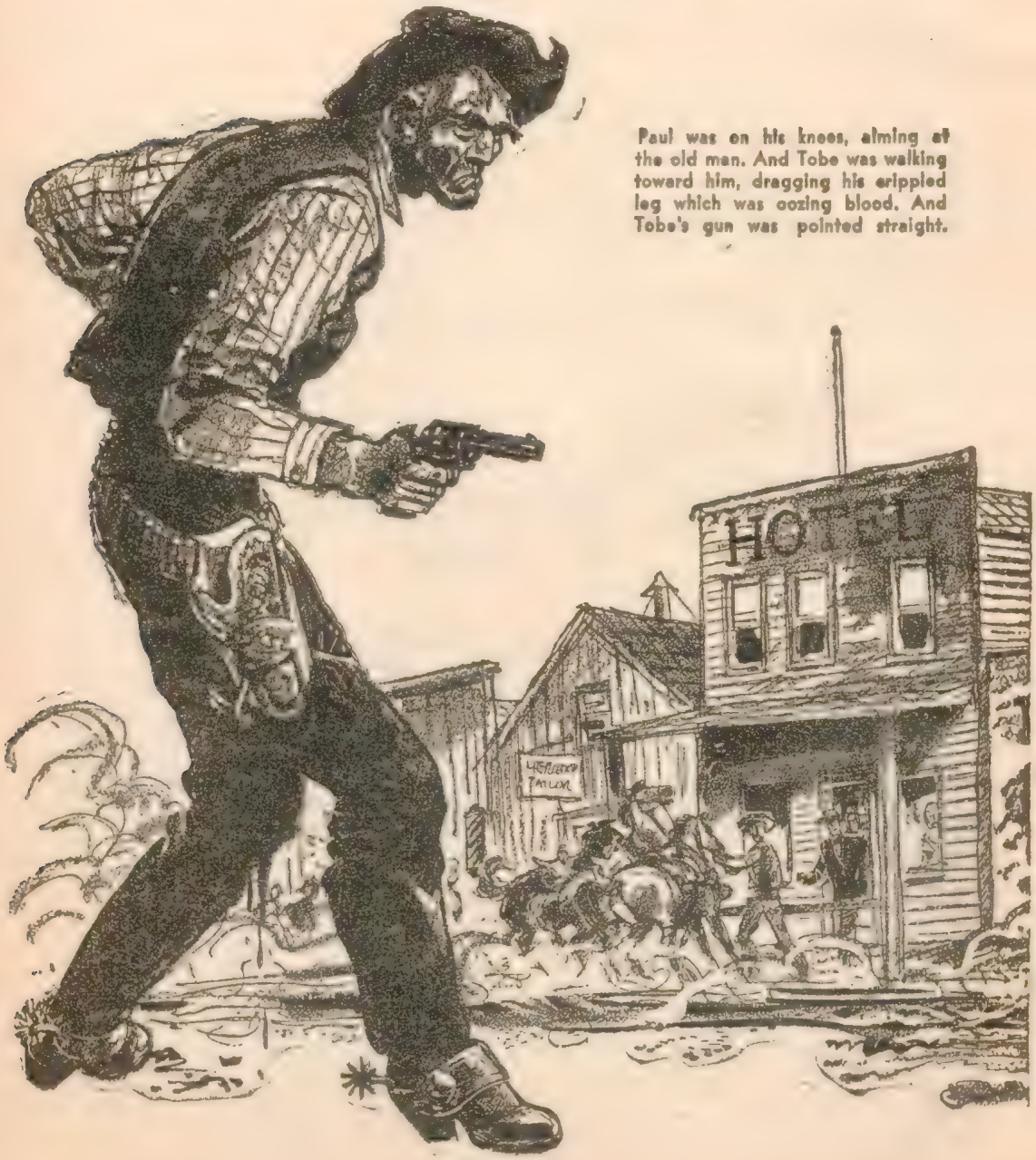
When spring came, other oxen were procured and driven over the long trails to where the wagons had been cached, so that the merchandise could finally be delivered. To the amazement of the freighters, they found that the oxen which they had left there, and expected had long since become only bleached skeletons, were not dead at all, but alive, active and healthy. The animals had managed to survive the long cold winter, to find the necessary food and shelter during the hard months, and fatten quickly to sleekness as the plains greened with spring's coming.

Previously, it had not been thought possible to do any extensive cattle raising where the winters were long and severe. Now, here was evidence that cattle could thrive on the northern ranges throughout the year. Where before only the Southwest had been cattle country, in a short time the open range extended northward to a new and greater pasturage, and soon vast herds of cattle roamed the plains of most of the West and North, as well as South.

See You In Hell!

By Richard Brister

Neither Paul nor Tobe wanted to fight each other. But the memory of Clay's death was between them, and there was nothing else they could do . . .



Paul was on his knees, aiming at the old man. And Tobe was walking toward him, dragging his crippled leg which was oozing blood. And Tobe's gun was pointed straight.

TENSE THUNDERHEADS, black and foreboding, cast a long shadow over the tiny cowtown of Gopher City. Men gathered somberly in small groups on the stoop of Beckman's Hotel and in front of the Double Dollar Saloon. Their hushed conversations reflected the mood of death which hung like a black mantle over this town.

"It's a damn shame. Clay was a real nice young feller, when he wasn't drinkin'."

"Jest young. Crazy reckless, that was Clay's trouble. Old Tobe's plenty tough, but when that kid got the bit in his teeth, no one could checkrein him."

"When's the funeral?"

"I dunno. Doc's been up half the night gettin' him ready. Tobe'll want it over with quick, if I know him. Probably sometime today."

"How's Paul this mornin'?"

"Who can say? He ain't been out of his shop yet. Must be skippin' breakfast."

"Maybe he ain't feelin' jest hungry."

"Don't reckon he would be, poor devil. You and I know it was Clay's fault all the way, but Tobe and the girl ain't like to look at Paul's side of it."

"Tobe ain't," sighed the other. "That's certain."

Down the wide, shadowed street, a tall man with a law badge on his vest paused, frowning, in front of Paul Marvin's gunsmith shop, then squared his blocky shoulders and walked inside.

Paul Marvin looked up from the workbench at the back, where he had been trying, without much luck, to fit a sear pin into George Foxhall's

saddle rifle. He put the Sharps down on the scarred wooden surface and tried to smile at his visitor, without much success.

"Morning, Sam."

"Paul," said the big marshal, "Charlie Ellender just rode in from the Lazy S. He tells me Tobe and Carla are on their way into town, ridin' the buckboard." Sam Grafton sucked air through his front teeth and looked worried. "Son, what're you fixing to do?"

Paul dropped vacant eyes to the Sharps on the bench. "Do, Sam? Looks to me like I've already done it. The kid's dead. I killed him."

THE MARSHAL sighed, and thrust his big hands deep in his pockets. "Understand, Paul, I ain't tryin' to tell you how to run your life. But if I was in your shoes, I'd figure to make myself kind of scarce the next four-five hours. You know how Tobe is. And he was mighty set on that youngster."

"There are some things you can't run away from," Paul said wearily.

"Jest how did it happen?" Sam Grafton asked. "I've heard five or six versions of it already. You know how folks get things like this garbled."

"Does it matter? The kid's dead. I killed him."

"All right, but it wasn't your fault. That's pretty certain. And if I know the exact circumstances, I may be able to head Tobe off a little."

Paul looked at him sardonically.

"Well," fumbled Sam Grafton, "mebbe I'm clutchin' for straws. Tobe leans down hard on his duty. But he's fond of you, boy."

"He was," Paul corrected.

"Why, hell," sputtered the marshal, "he was goin' to let you marry his only daughter, wasn't he? Don't be takin' such a dim view of the situation. It ain't all entirely hopeless."

"Isn't it, Sam?"

"Tell me, that's all. Jest tell me how it happened."

"What is there to tell? They cleaned the kid out in that stud game at the Dollar. He must've been drunk as a coot when he climbed in my side window and started to rifle the cash register. Clay was no thief, Sam. All he knew was he needed more money and this was a quick way to lay his hands on it. He probably would've come clean with me in the morning. Either paid me back or given me his I.O.U. for what he'd taken."

"I can buy that. The kid jest wasn't accountable, with booze in his belly... How'd you come to shoot him?"

PAUL PUT a trembling hand over his eyes. "I never knew it was him, I swear it. I come awake in the back room, heard the noise up in the front here, and come barging in with my gun in my hand, still half asleep. The kid must've gone loco. He let one go at me. I shot at his gunflash, and got him full in the chest. You know how it is at a time like that, Sam. You don't stop to think; you pull trigger."

"That crazy kid. That damn crazy kid."

"He was a good kid, Sam. Nice as pie, when he wasn't drinkin'. I—I filled up like a water bag when I turned a light on him. I—I just busted out cryin'."

Sam Grafton made a suckling sound through his teeth. "It's too bad. It's a plain rotten shame. Paul, I'll try to head Tobe off and make him see how it was, but I don't see much hope for it. Tobe's strong on pride and his duty. Tobe's got that iron in his back. Words ain't like to budge him."

"I know."

"Son, why don't you skin out of town? Give him time to cool down some."

Paul twisted his mouth. "We're still talking about Tobe Sinclair, ain't we?"

"Well, but—"

"Sam, I could skin out, like you say, and stay away for three years, and sure as I'd show my face in Gopher City again, Tobe'd come gunning for me. I killed his only boy. Tobe lives by his code. Nothing you say, nothing I do's going to change him a fraction. One way, you got to admire him for that."

"But, dammit all," exploded the marshal, "there's no earthly sense to it. You could skin out for good, Paul."

Paul's eyes came up dully. "I grew up in this town, Sam. All my friends are here. My lifework is here."

"Son, I know just how you feel. But—"

"I have a code of my own, Sam," Paul said, and his mouth went thin. "When Tobe gets to town, he won't have to hunt for me. I'll be right here in the shop if he wants to have things out with me."

HE WAS still at work on the Sharps, a half hour later, when he heard the clump of hard leather bootheels on the plank wall outside, heard Tobe Sinclair's great, throaty voice booming, "Marshal, I'm goin' in there. Stand back now."

"Tobe," Sam Grafton was pleading, "what's your rush? Take your time now."

"Marshal, take your hands off me. He killed the boy. I'm goin' in there and face him with it. You nor your law badge ain't goin' to keep me from doin' what my conscience tells me. Stay clear now. This party's private between me and Paul Marvin."

The door burst open and Tobe Sinclair filled it, a gaunt, white-whiskered old giant. His chest lifted and fell, under the black town coat with the mourning band on the sleeve. Dressed for a funeral, Paul thought, bleakly meeting the embattled old eagle eyes. But the old man had slung a gunbelt around the skirt of the black coat, and his hands hovered above the two holsters.

Tobe Sinclair backed against the door, closing it in Marshal Sam Grafton's worried face.

"Paul," he said, "come on out from in back of that bench. Nice and easy."

Paul put the Sharps down. "Tobe, ain't you pretty excited?"

"Come out from in back of that workbench."

Paul looked the old man in the eye. "Why?"

"I know my duty. I'm here t'do it. But I don't shoot sittin' ducks... Come out of there now. And I give y'fair warnin', y'd better come shootin'."

Paul put his hands against the top of his bench and stood up. He nodded down at his holsterless hips. "I don't wear guns during work hours, Tobe."

"Y'knew I was comin'," the old man spat out. "Y'must've known I was comin'."

"I knew you'd be here, Tobe."

"Y'were handy enough with your hardware last night." The old man was working up a rage. "Turned yellow this mornin', have you?"

"I knew you'd be here," Paul repeated flatly. "I didn't know when, Tobe. Thought you might want to see the boy decently buried, before—"

"Those your guns?" Tobe flickered eagle eyes toward a gunbelt draped over a wall peg.

"Those are my guns."

"Strap 'em on, if you're goin' to. I ain't here t'palaver with the man that shot my boy Clay."

PAUL TOOK the belt down and methodically strapped it about his middle. Now that the time had come, there was no feeling in his fingers.

He felt drugged, devoid of any sensation except an over-all dullness. "Tobe, I—"

"You what?"

"Tobe, I ain't goin' to say a word about...about what happened last night. You've got your own slant on that, and I ain't fool enough to think words'll change your feelin's on it. But...Tobe, where's Carla?"

"Down at the funeral parlor, cryin' over what's left of her brother."

"She—she knew you were coming up here?"

"She's a Sinclair," the old man announced stiffly, proudly. "Boy, I ain't goin' to bandy another word with you. A man that stands and gabbles at a time like this, is either a damn fool, or plain yellow. Go for them irons!"

The old man was in deadly earnest, Paul knew. For even as Tobe Sinclair called the showdown, his own gnarled hands were darting downward, grasping the butts of the guns at his bony hips.

Paul's own right hand came up, lightning quick, bearing the long-barrelled Colt's, but he did not press the trigger.

The door had come slamming in as Tobe unholstered his guns It was Marshal Sam Grafton's heavy body which thrust the door open. Tobe was flung forward, cursing, off balance, as he tried to get his guns back into train.

Paul stood there, aiming at the old man, unable to trigger.

Tobe Sinclair swore in his throat, and panted, "Damn fool. Had the drop on me. Why didn't y'shoot?"

"I don't shoot sitting ducks either."

"Marshal," ground out the old man, "I'll thank you t'mess out of my business in the future."

"Word just come up street," Sam Grafton said levelly. "They're waitin' on you, Tobe, for the funeral. Be kind of mean toward the boy, if you wasn't there to hear the parson speak over the body."

"I got business to tend to," Tobe growled.

"Figured you might want to pay your last respects to the boy," the lawman murmured softly, "before they's any more killin'."

The old man stood there, a gaunt, defiant old figure, struggling to decide. He looked hard at Paul Marvin.

"I ain't softenin' none," he said in a brittle inflection. "I mean t'settle with you before sundown."

"I know, Tobe," Paul's voice was thick.

"Make sure you're wearin' them irons," the old man said, "next time we come together."

HE TURNED and walked out, stiff and proud, his back straight as a ramrod.

Sam Grafton sighed and sucked air through his teeth. "There goes a whole heap of man. They don't make 'em just that stripe nowadays."

"No, they don't," Paul admitted bleaky. "It's too bad you came in like that, Sam."

"Too bad! Boy, are you crazy? You'd've killed each other. At least one of you'd be stretched out dead right now, sure, if—"

"One of us will," Paul said, "before sundown. He meant it, Sam. There's no compromise in Tobe's makeup. He'll have his showdown with me before this day is over."

He took off the gunbelt and hung it up on the wall peg, then took down his coat and went toward the door.

Sam gaped at him. "Where you goin'? Why'd you take them guns off?"

Paul smiled back at him wanly. "I wouldn't wear guns to Clay's funeral, Sam. It wouldn't look right, now, would it?"

"Tarnation!" exploded the marshal. "Ain't that just like you! Kill a man and then risk your life goin' to his funeral."

"He was a nice kid, Sam. Somehow, I think he'd like me to be there. Feel like it's my duty."

"You and your duty. Him an' his duty. You and Tobe's cut out of the same cloth. Stubborn and proud. You'll kill each other doin' your duty."

"We probably will, Sam," Paul said, and walked out under an overcast sky. The funeral procession was moving around the corner of Main and Groff toward the burial lot in back of the Lutheran Church, and the uncommon darkness of this day made the black clothes of the mourners seem more depressing even than they normally would have.

Somewhere, a dog howled mournfully. Death, and the threat of death, laid its pall along the dark, almost deserted street.

When he came to the side of the grave, the others stirred and whispered, staring covertly at him. He put his chin down on his chest and prayed silently. When he lifted his eyes, he found himself staring into those of Tobe Sinclair, who stood across the grave from him.

The gaunt face hardened. Tobe looked away from him. Paul looked at Carla, who stood next to her father. He could not see her eyes through the thick veil, but he noticed that her shoulders were trembling, her fingers knotting and unknotting as she looked at him.

TOBE BROKE down in the middle of the minister's service. It was hard, to see that old wolf give way to this softness in public. When it was all over, Carla had to support him to their carriage.

Paul returned to the shop, and settled down to a vigil of waiting. The old man didn't come. Paul paced the floor, smoking incessantly.

The door opened and Carla came in, pushing the veil away from her tear-stained face. He wanted to put his arms around her, comfort her somehow, but hesitated, vaguely sensing she was not here to be comforted by the man who had killed her brother.

"Darling," he faltered. "Darling, I—"

"Oh, Paul," she sobbed, and ran into his arms. "Why? Why did this have to happen?"

He held her close against him. "Nobody knows why these things happen, Carla. They just happen."

"Poppa says he's going to kill you."

"I know."

"He's so stern with himself. So—so relentless. He says you killed Clay, and until he kills you, he won't be able to walk with his head up. He—he won't listen when I try to tell him how it happened." She peered up at him tearfully. "If it comes to—to a fight, what will you do, Paul?"

"What can a man do but fight, when a fight is brought to him."

She gaped at him. "You—you'll kill him. After you've already killed Clay. You—"

"What should I do, Carla?" he asked hopelessly.

"Run!" she said. "Oh, please, Paul, run! Get out of town, before it comes to anything like that. He's in—in the Dollar right now, drinking whiskey, trying to pull himself back together. You could still get away, before—"

"No," he said firmly.

"Paul. Please. If you love me."

"Darling, I'm sorry. It isn't my way. It would be unfair to him, to—to both of us."

SHE LOOKED at him with the beginnings of anger. "What is your

way, Paul? What way are you set on?"

"A man can't run from this kind of trouble, Carla. You must be able to see that."

"What is your way, Paul?"

"Stay and have it out with him."

"And kill him? Is that your way?"

"Or be killed by him. Darling, try to understand—"

"I do," she said dully. "I do understand, Paul."

"No, you don't. It's what's inside him and what's inside me that's forcing the issue between us. I can't run and still hold my head up any more than he can back down now and hold his up. I'm not angry at your father. I'm sorry for him. I don't even think he's bitter toward me. It's just that my hand held the gun that killed Clay, and his code requires—"

"Sorry for him," she said. "You're sorry for him. Yet you'll kill him."

"Darling—"

"I guess I don't understand, after all," she cried out bitterly. "I hope I never do understand such a brutal, cold-hearted outlook, Paul Marvin." She slipped the diamond ring off her finger and held it out toward him.

"What's that for?"

"Take it."

"Carla. Carla, don't. Don't be this way with me."

She let the ring fall to the floor. She swung toward the door, and he caught at her shoulders. She scraped his hands off, as if his touch burned her.

She flung herself through the door, and he followed numbly.

He saw old Tobe coming down the street from the direction of the Double Dollar, walking stiff and proud. The sharp eyes in Tobe's face were slitted as they met Paul's.

It was here at last then, Paul thought, the moment for which he had waited. He stepped down off the boardwalk into the dust of the street, hitching at his gunbelt while he walked.

Along the boardwalk, foot traffic had stopped as if at a prearranged signal. Miraculously, people who had been quietly talking in small cliques at the corner, evaporated into the nearest doorways. Up above, the great thunderheads gathered, cast the long shadows of a false dusk on the dark street. A black tomcat with a tiny white tuft on his forehead scurried along the gutter, then darted, wraith-like, into the alley that flanked the Double Dollar.

AND CARLA SINCLAIR, reading the signs, ran sobbing toward her father.

Paul could hear the old man's guttural curse, even at this forty-yard distance.

"Somebody come and get me shut of this girl," he boomed at the shuttered houses.

He fended the girl off with one long, bony arm, until two men discovered enough courage to run and drag her, struggling and sobbing, into one of the houses.

The old man walked down the street toward Paul, and Paul went forward to meet him.

"Killed him," Tobe was saying dully. "Killed my boy. Wiped out the name of Sinclair with one reckless bullet. Rest easy, Clay. I ain't goin' to let him live and tell of it."

Thirty yards. Now they walked stiff-legged, tense, their eyes frozen on each other's gun arms. A faint shaft of sunlight briefly illumined the old man's wrinkled face. He was smiling as he came forward, Paul noticed, and felt a thrust of cold admiration for Tobe Sinclair's iron control at this moment.

"Paul," said Tobe with a wonder-

ful calmness, "I'm sure as hell fixing to kill you. Go for them irons."

Paul waited until the old man's gnarled hand swept down, clawing at a gun butt, yanking a sixgun clear of the leather. He couldn't hate this old man, couldn't bring himself to usurp any split-second advantage.

His own draw was smooth, relaxed, lethal in the swiftness of execution with which he got the Colt up and triggered. At the last moment, he corrected his aim downward, saw the old man's leg twitch as the slug ripped through the flesh of the thigh.

AND TOBE'S gun flashed at him; a boring gouge, a thousand fiery pinpoints smashed at his right shoulder, sent him reeling back in a drunken pirouette. He stumbled over his own nerveless feet and went down, kneeling, peering owlishly through the dust he had lifted.

He aimed a gun at the old man, waveringly, but could not bring himself to pull trigger. Old Tobe Sinclair was coming up the street toward him, hauling his crippled right leg with each step like a bag of potatoes. He, too, had a gun pointed, straight at Paul Marvin.

At fifteen feet he stopped, and they looked at each other warily across the gun barrels. Tobe put a free hand to the bloody spot on his hip and said painfully, plaintively, "You can shoot straighter than that, Paul."

"So can you, Tobe."

"Son, I can pull this trigger right now and blow you to Kingdom Come, if I want to."

"Tobe, I can pull this one."

"Then why in sin don't you?"

Paul sighed. "Don't guess I want to. Don't guess Clay'd want that, either."

"What would he want, Paul?" The gaunt face was sad and perplexed now.

"Tobe, that's for your conscience to tell you," Paul mumbled.

The old man stood there in doubt for another long moment, then slid his gun into its holster. "I reckon Clay wouldn't ask no more'n this of his daddy. Paul, how's that shoulder?"

"Tender."

"Carla," Tobe's voice suddenly boomed, "fetch Doc. Couple damn fools here need some patchin'. Paul, I'd admire to have you come out to the Lazy S, for your convalescin'."

Paul watched the girl run down the walk toward Doc's office. "I'd admire to come, Tobe," he admitted.

THE END

THE INDIAN SIGN of FOUR

★ By CARTER T. WAINWRIGHT ★

WHILE a good many of our own traditions, myths and legends are based on the number three, the Indians regarded the number four in many connections as sacred or mystic. Many tribes, for instance, believed that the spirit left the body on the fourth day after death, and since burial took place immediately after death, watchers sat by the grave for four nights thereafter, keeping a fire burning and providing sufficient food for the newly deceased.

In many of the Indian religious rites, the four winds, the cardinal points of the compass, had a strong meaning. The simple cross, pointing as it does in four ways, was a much-used symbol, conveying an entirely different idea to the Indians than it does to Christians. The cross to the Indians often represented the dragonfly, an insect which had great importance and meaning to them.

PRETTY GAL

By Dew Klapp

LIBBY RANDOLPH

CHUCK RANDOLPH

When a man's wife begins to hanker for something more exciting than ranch life, it's time he looks around and starts acting about it.

CHUCK RANDOLPH hesitated for a moment on the threshold of his wife's room. His big shoulders drooped, his grey eyes were troubled.

Libby saw him in the mirror of her vanity dresser. She let the bright waves of her hair ripple slowly through the comb before she turned.

"Oh, Chuck!" she sighed, a petulant little frown puckering the dark curved lines of her brows. "What is it now?"

The rancher flinched at her tone. Once, there would have been a happy lilt of expectancy in those same words.

"We can't go to the dance tonight, Libby," he told her reluctantly. "Old Jobe's split himself open on bobwire."

The girl's brown eyes kindled. She tapped her foot irritably. "Of course,

He would. I always play a poor second to the livestock around here! Well, I'm going to that dance if I have to ride to Bluff City alone, Chuck Randolph!" She shot a quick glance at her profile in the mirror and smiled complacently. "Maybe someone will see me home!"

For the time it takes to bridle a bronc, Chuck said nothing. He wiped Jobe's blood from his arms with a piece of waste. His heart thumped and his throat was tight. His eyes lingered on the gold of Libby's hair flowing over the green dressing gown he had bought for her birthday last year. She was the prettiest thing in Travis County, but a man couldn't let a thousand dollar bull die, to go dancing. Libby ought to see that.

"I hate to stop you, honey," Chuck told her heavily, "but get this straight—you're not going to any dance tonight!"

Libby knotted her hair with a vicious twist and slipped a blue taffeta dress over her head. "That's what you think!" she murmured.

Chuck missed that remark. He never doubted as he walked slowly toward the barn, that Libby would obey him.

Then he forgot Libby in the troubles of poor old Jobe.

THE MOON was slanting downhill and a rooster by the corral crowded for two o'clock, and still there was no sign of Libby and the buggy. Chuck sat on the porch steps and peered through the moonlight down the dusty ranch road. He flipped a half-smoked cigarette toward the cactus bed and ran a hand across his sweaty forehead.

Reckon he'd have to ride out and meet her. Here it was, near getting-up time already, and him with a hard day's work ahead! He had not believed she would defy him and take the team, but Libby had a lot of fire in her. Maybe she didn't like being told not to go. Chuck was a reasonable man. And he loved Libby, faults and all. Could be it was his own fault anyway, he told himself. He'd always tried to please her, every way he knew—spoiling her, telling her how pretty she was. Here lately, she'd been acting mighty uppity. She couldn't even pass a looking-glass without preening herself like a courting pigeon.

As he threw a saddle across the bay, an idea struck him. Suppose he should start rousting Libby out at

GARY GRUBER

daylight, making her work? Show her how it felt to dance all night, then be on the job next day? Maybe then she wouldn't feel so frisky, come dark. The idea seemed so good that he laughed aloud.

Riding toward the gate, Chuck looked across his acres, lying quiet in the moonlight. Libby had been proud enough that day they rode into town together and registered their brand. Sweet and cheerful she was in those days, too, and seeming contented with him and the ranch. But that was six months ago. Before the loneliness got her. If he weren't struggling so hard to get a foothold, he could hire a hand to mind the stock and an issue like tonight's would never come up. But it was Libby's own idea that they sink their last dollar in the Little R.

As Chuck rode toward a twisted scrub oak that marked the halfway point to town, his mount's ears flicked forward at some sound ahead Pulling the horse into the shadow of a shelving rock, he sat quietly, waiting. His dark, angular face was hard.

FOR A MOMENT, he could hear nothing but the creak of saddle leather under him. Then the sound of trotting hoofs came from down beyond, where the road crossed Onion Creek.

He heard his wife's light laugh, then the deeper tone of a masculine voice. His jaw set angrily. This was not a mischievous prank of Libby's any longer. As the team came even with the sheltering rock, he spurred forward and grabbed the near horse's bit, pulling the vehicle to a halt.

A lean figure jerked forward from the buggy seat with a startled oath. Chuck heard Libby cry, "Don't, Gary!" and knew the man was reaching for a gun.

"Easy, there!" Chuck snapped.

Letting the rein he held slide through his left hand, the rancher eased his bay toward the buggy and peered inside. "Light!" he told the man sternly.

Gary Gruber crawled over the wheel. He moved toward a saddled horse tied to the rear spring of the buggy.

"Let the hoss be, Gruber!" Chuck told him. "I'll see he gets back. You ain't usin' him tonight!"

Gruber stared, uncomprehending.

"It's four miles to that crooked gambling joint of yours, feller, so you better light a shuck!"

"You mean walk?" Gruber sputtered.

"Yep. And I'm letting you off easy Stick to that dive of yours and you'll stay healthy," Chuck warned. "If I catch you on the Little R again, you won't!" Gesturing down the road with his quirt, the rancher added, "Move!"

The gambler walked a few paces, then turned. His long face gleamed white in the moonlight. "You're on your home range now, Randolph," he snarled, "but step light when you come to town!" And he stalked off down the road.

Chuck wheeled the bay and spurred toward the buggy. Libby sat in stiff-backed silence. Her chin was high and her features were set. She did not turn her head.

The rancher brought his quirt down sharply across the rumps of both horses, and the team broke into a long run toward the ranch. Libby, shucking her dignity, grabbed frantically for the reins.

THE DAYS following were silent and grim on the Little R. Three times Chuck routed Libby from her bed at five and sent her to do the ranch house chores. The morning of the fourth day was threatening. Low clouds scudded across the pastures, seeming to brush the tops of mes-

quite and prickly pear with wads of dirty wool.

Libby's face was as dark as the rolling clouds. Her eyes smouldered. Chuck would have been warned had he looked her way, but he was afraid to glance at her. He knew he would weaken at the sight of her sunny hair or the pert turn of her head, and soft, foolish words would come tumbling from his lips.

He swallowed the words in lumps and fought down the urge to take her in his arms. The sight of blisters on her small, shapely hands hurt him like lighted matches under his own fingernails. He had always done the hard chores for her.

Then, too, there were those two words that belonged to them alone. It had been weeks now since he had whispered "Pretty gal!", his lips close to her ear under the shining little curls there, and she hadn't even noticed! Those were "courting words", and once they had meant a lot to her. It just showed how far two people could slide apart, once they started.

Raindrops large as marbles slapped Chuck in the face suddenly. Then a grey blanket of rain roared over them. He pulled the bay to a stop and turned to look at Libby. She sat sullen in her saddle, her lips pale, water streaming down her face. Then she sneezed. Concern for her blacked out all other feelings in Chuck.

"Let's quit this, Lib," he said impulsively. "I've got to see how the south pasture bunch is making out, but you go on home and get into dry clothes, honey."

"Don't you sweet-talk me, Chuck Randolph!'

Libby spit out the words, turned her pony and dug her heels into its side, splattering through the mud toward the ranch house.

THE SKY had cleared when Chuck rode in some two hours later. He circled and passed through the open corral gate, whistling, unsaddled and slipped the bridle from the big bay's head before he noticed that the buggy and team were missing.

His mouth turned dry as he ran for the house. Taking the steps three at a time, he pushed open the front door. The house was unnaturally quiet. A mouse scurried across the rug and dived for its hole.

Chuck raced through the house, calling Libby. He got no answer. In her room, drawers gaped open, clothes lay scattered on the floor. He picked up a rumpled pair of levis from the corner. Her toilet articles were gone. The vanity dresser he had made for her from a big live oak that once grew near the gate, stood bare and accusing.

His eyes travelled up the wide smoothness of the bed to a note pinned on her pillow. He tore it loose and read the words in one desperate sweep:

"I'm not coming back! Libby."

The words sank into Chuck's mind slowly and stirred a cold rage there against Gary Gruber, rather than Libby. He felt that the gambler had played on Libby's boredom and her natural desire for pleasure.

Chuck lifted a belt and holstered gun from a peg and strapped it about his waist. His face was grim as he walked out to his horse.

A CROUPY piano scattered sour notes in the air, and a frizzy blonde wailed a tuneless song as Chuck pushed through the batwings of Gruber's Crystal Palace. He stood for a moment looking the crowd over, then walked to the bar.

"Where's Gruber?" he asked the florid barman. A sneer formed under the man's untidy mustaches, then

vanished before the look in Chuck's eyes. "Dunno," he grunted.

Warped planks rattled Chuck's heels as he strode down the boardwalk. He turned through the door of Bluff City's only hotel and asked for his wife at the scarred desk. She had registered there that day, the clerk informed him, but was not in. However, he volunteered, one could probably locate her at the Crystal Palace where she had secured employment.

Chuck didn't like the desk man's suavity nor his cynical smile. He reckoned the town folks thought, rightly enough, that a man should have better control over his wife. Grimly, he headed for the Palace again. With each step, his anger grew. His fists ached to crack against Gary Gruber's chalky face.

Chuck pushed past the domino tables, the roulette wheels and afternoon poker games to the rear of the big gambling house. So resolute was his stride that he met no interference.

Pulling open an oak-paneled door, he entered a musty hall. His stomach knotted at what he feared might be met beyond this passage. Libby was so foolishly innocent beneath her new air of sophistication. And Gary Gruber was a rat, no doubt about that. Bluff City despised the man, Chuck knew. He had heard that Mayor Clyde and Gruber had almost come to blows last week when Clyde told the gambler to clean up his games or the Crystal Palace would be padlocked.

CHUCK FOUND a door to his right with "private" on the frosted glass. Shadowy figures moved about inside. Then a shadow grew big against the glass and the door opened. A man stepped into the hall. He jumped aside, startled, when he saw Chuck's forbidding face.

"Gruber!" Chuck's hard voice halted him.

The man recovered quickly. A half-smile turned up one corner of the thin lips, but his cold eyes were watchful. "This is a real pleasure, Randolph! I didn't expect you so soon!" The gambler held up a slim, long-fingered hand when he saw Chuck double his fist. "I wouldn't, friend, if I were you. It wouldn't be so nice for those outside to know your charming wife is here without your consent, now would it?" he asked smoothly.

Chuck choked on his rage. His big hands trembled, but he made no further move to hit the man before him. It was a moment before he could trust himself to speak.

"Where is she?' he asked, finally.

"Let's step in here, shall we?" Gruber moved toward another door some distance down the hall, opened it and motioned Chuck inside.

The young rancher found himself inside a makeshift dressing room that was evidently used by the entertainers for quick changes. A big man sat in one corner reading a grimy magazine.

Gruber indicated a chair, but Chuck ignored the gesture.

"Where's my wife?" he demanded.

"That, my dear Randolph, you shall know later." Gruber answered calmly. Then his tone changed. His next words were like little needling chips of ice. "This is my range, cowboy! You're roped and tied and the iron's heating! You'll wear my brand from now on, and like it." His bone-white face broke into a mirthless grin. "As for your wife, friend, at this moment she's standing over a dead man with a gun in her hand!"

CHUCK'S FACE froze. His hand slid toward his gun, but was

stopped in mid-draw by an iron grip. A burly man stood behind him, smiling lazily. Gruber's grin widened.

"Calm yourself, friend Randolph," he advised tauntingly. "Sheriff Hammond, I assure you, could never find a jury in Travis County that would indict a lady! But you or I might not fare so well."

"You—!" Chuck lunged forward. The burly man stuck out a scuffed boot and tripped him neatly. The gambler's white, smiling face blurred before him. He heard Gruber tell his henchman to get the sheriff.

"When the sheriff gets here, Randolph," Gruber said, "you'll see what I mean."

Stumbling to his feet, Chuck followed Jerry into a lushly furnished office, just as clumping footsteps told of the sheriff's arrival. The rancher's eyes flicked from the body of a man sprawled awkwardly across a rumpled Persian rug to Libby, sitting huddled in a corner of the room.

Chuck's face softened. She looked so little and alone. Gruber was a liar. Libby wouldn't shoot a man. She was too fine. Still...you never could tell about a woman, of course. She might do a stunt like that to protect a man she loved. And maybe she did care for that skunk.

He glanced at the owner of the Crystal Palace. The man was good-looking in a white, thin sort of way. And he had a lot of book-learning, which might appeal to a smart girl like Libby.

The sheriff's deep voice startled Chuck out of his gloom. "Miz Randolph," the lawman was asking, "why'd you shoot Mayor Clyde?"

"I—I had to. I had to protect myself."

"Where'd you git that big gun I seen you holdin'?"

"From—er—Gary Gruber's desk."

The last remnants of a once happy world crashed about Chuck's shoulders. He started to cross the room to his wife. But the sheriff halted him. "Set down!" he ordered sharply.

SHERIFF HAMMOND was a short, round man with whiskers that seemed to grow in all directions. He was known around Bluff City as a square lawman, though plenty tough. He stood now with his legs firmly planted, looking down on the dead man.

Gruber had sidled over near the window. His face was expressionless, but his cold eyes watched the sheriff closely.

Chuck stood glumly silent. His eyes moved restlessly about the room. A big Colt lay near the body. Chuck studied it a moment, then his eyes lighted suddenly. He swung to face the sheriff. "Say! My wife didn't kill Mayor Clyde!" Chuck cried. "This is a put-up game!" Fists doubled, the rancher started for the gambler.

"Set down you!" the sheriff roared, "If you don't quit cutting up, I'll make you get out!"

Gruber smiled thinly, as Chuck restrained himself by a visible effort.

Sheriff Hammond looked at Libby. "Miz Randolph," he said, "I hate to lock up a sweet-lookin' gal like you. But when a lawman busts in on a lady standin' over a dead man with a gun in her hand, he ain't got much say-so."

A puzzled look crept into the sheriff's eyes. He looked at the mayor's body, then at Gruber, back to the body, and then up and down Chuck's rugged five-feet-ten.

"Mayor Clyde was a fine man," he said slowly. "Somehow, I can't figger him as no hand to bother a lady none."

Gruber's smile faded. Chuck looked at Libby. There was hurt in his honest eyes, but love was there, too. He knew now that he could save her

from her own foolish self, though she probably wouldn't thank him for it.

"Mind if I show you why my wife couldn't have shot Mayor Clyde?" he asked the sheriff. "Then you can figger the rest for yourself."

Sheriff Hammond hesitated, then nodded assent.

Chuck pointed to the big Colt lying on the floor. "Pick up that gun, Libby," he ordered.

The girl lifted the weapon hesitantly.

"See if you can hit that deer head over the fireplace."

LIBBY AIMED the heavy gun. She tried hard to control the massive weapon, but it wavered erratically as she struggled to encompass the big butt and at the same time curl a finger around the too-distant trigger.

The sheriff's eyes snapped as he grasped the significance of what he saw. He moved forward to take the gun from Libby.

"Wait!"

Chuck lifted a detaining hand. He grinned wickedly at the uneasy look on Gruber's face.

"Watch this, Sheriff!" he snapped. "Shoot, Libby!"

The girl did her best to do as Chuck told her, determined to back up her confession.

"Use both hands!"

"Oh!"

Libby grasped the butt of the big weapon firmly in her right hand and awkwardly pulled the trigger with two fingers of her left. The gun roared. With the stink of cordite came the sound of tinkling glass as the slug smashed through a windowpane a good nine feet from the target.

Sheriff Hammond exhaled a sigh of relief that agitated his unruly whiskers. "That shore lets you out, ma'am," he said. "Wouldn't no man be sich a fool as to stand and wait till you got around to hittin' him!"

Libby burst into sobs. "He didn't mean to do it!" she cried. "I know he didn't!"

Chuck tried to swallow the lump in his throat. Libby's words could mean but one thing. She knew who killed Mayor Clyde and had been covering up for him by confessing to the shooting herself.

"Gruber killed him!" Chuck's sudden accusation startled the sheriff. Libby's sobs chopped off suddenly.

"How come you think so?" Hammond questioned.

Gruber blustered forward. "Look here, Randolph, I resent..." his words trailed off as he met Chuck's eyes.

THE YOUNG rancher thought fast. He couldn't tell Sheriff Hammond his guess, that Gruber killed Clyde, was born of his fear that Libby loved the gambler. There must be some concrete evidence to back up his suspicion! Mean as Gruber was, it still wasn't likely he'd gun a man like the Mayor down just for spite.

Bits of town talk stirred in Chuck's mind. He remembered the threat Mayor Clyde was said to have made to the gambler. So he took a chance and plunged. "You'll find yore proof on the dead man," he stated.

For once, Gruber's face lost its dead-pan expression. Chuck's long shot had hit its mark, somehow.

With an exclamation, Sheriff Hammond jumped forward. "Hell's fire! What with Miz Randolph muddyin' up the water, I never thought of that!"

Gently, he turned the stiffening body over and ran through the dead man's pockets. A folded, legal-look-

ing paper rewarded his fast search.

"Well, I'll be...!" Hammond shoved the document toward Chuck.

The rancher glanced at the paper. "A warrant for Gruber's arrest!" he cried. Too late, he tried to bite back the words. They would hurt Libby, and he didn't want to hurt her. But she didn't seem to hear. Her bright head hung low.

"Yeah," the sheriff nodded, "I'd plum forgot about it. Clyde showed it to me this mornin'. Said he was goin' to give Gruber one more chance. If Gruber refused to clean up his joint, he was goin' to have me serve this warrant tonight. The Mayor was a good man."

"But then, Gruber didn't know Clyde had it—"

Stopping abruptly in the middle of his sentence, Chuck leaped. But Gruber was faster. He had plunged through the broken window and lit running. The sheriff tried to unlimber his weapon with arthritis-knotted fingers.

"Don't shoot!" Chuck yelled. "I'll get him!"

HE VAULTED after the gambler. He made no move toward his gun, though he could have shot Gruber down with ease. His business with the man was more personal now. He wanted to mess up that smug, white face. Gruber stumbled, turned and saw Chuck bearing down upon him. He braced himself for the impact.

The two men met. Their arms flailed like ungoverned pistons gone wild. But the gambler was no match for the husky rancher. He gave ground, trying to ward off the cowman's heavy fists.

Chuck saw Gruber drop his guard and waded in for the final punch. Too late, he saw a little sleeve gun slide down into the gambler's hand. Jerking to one side, he felt flame sear his cheek and bells rang in his ears. Before Gruber could fire again, Chuck grabbed the man's slim wrist with his left hand and twisted until the bone snapped. With almost the same motion, he brought up his right fist into a crashing blow that connected with Gruber's jaw. The man sank limply to the ground.

"I've been wanting to do that for quite a spell!" Chuck panted.

Fist throbbing, he turned and walked back the way he had come. But there was no spring to his step. With that jaw-crunching blow, Chuck felt that he had extracted the only pleasure life held for him now.

THE SHERIFF took Gruber with him. The crowd that gathered had talked it over and dispersed when Chuck and Libby moved off toward the livery stable.

"For the looks of things, Libby, we'll ride out of town together," Chuck told her stiffly. He glanced at his wife's face, waiting for an answer. She made none.

"We can separate at the forks and you can go wherever you've a mind to. I'll sell the Little R and send you what I get for it," he offered. Still she said nothing.

In silence, they rode out of town until they reached a point where the road divided. One fork was a wide, smooth highway that led to the city. The other was narrow and rocky. It ended at the Little R and promised nothing more than a lonely uphill grind.

"'Bye, Libby!"

Chuck moistened his lips and waited for her to spur down the smooth, wide road and out of his life.

With a firm pressure on her horse's neck, Libby turned her pony toward the Little R. Then, for the first time, she raised her head and looked Chuck in the eye. Her face was serene and

full of purpose.

"Libby!" Chuck's horse leaped to the side of his wife's mount. The rancher's head was whirling so he couldn't corral his thoughts. "I—I thought—"

"I know, Chuck. You thought I was protecting Jerry." She lowered her eyes to hide the tears that started. "Jerry told me you had killed Mayor Clyde for saying things about me. I ought to have known he wouldn't have done that. But I didn't stop to think, I was so scared. I knew then how much I really loved you. I could see you, swinging from a rope, just because I had been vain and silly and crazy for good times. And I prayed hard then, for one more chance. Oh, Chuck," she wailed, "I—I want to go home!"

She swayed toward the big bay and Chuck, reaching out a long arm, pulled her to his saddle in front of him. And buried his dark face in her hair, that the setting sun turned to a riot of golden cobwebs.

"Pretty gal!" he whispered, "My pretty gal!"

THE END

The Trail Herd

★ By E. BRUCE YACHES ★

THE MOST splendid chapter in the history of cattle raising is undoubtedly those few decades in the nineteenth century in which millions of cattle were driven northward to a market, or to new ranges. The operation and management of these trail herds utilized to best advantage the remarkable craftsmanship of the cowboy.

It is an amazing fact that these experienced trailers could take several hundred longhorns, most of them having known nothing but the utterly wild and free life of the Texas ranges, and in a short time make of them an almost perfect traveling unit. Knowledge and understanding of the creatures with which they worked played an important part in this achievement, together with the alertness and single-minded attention to the job at hand which has always characterized the cowboy.

When the cattle had been road-branded, and the outfit was all ready to move, the start was made in a very leisurely fashion. The herd drifted easily, grazing as it went, and the cowboys worked only to keep it from spreading out too much, and to keep it moving along just a little.

After a few hours, the cowboys began to drive the herd faster. The point riders came first, riding on either side of the lead steers, urging them along at a lively pace. Then came the swing riders, pushing the main body of the herd into a more compact mass, keeping them following along, preventing any cattle from wandering off from the herd. In the last and least desirable position, came the tail riders, who kept the laggards among the cattle from dropping out. Their responsibility was for the stupid ones, the lame ones, and those few obstinate cows which never gave up the idea of going right back to Texas. The tail riders had to endure the worst of the heat, the smell, and the clouds of dust stirred up by the moving herd.

Before many days, the individual cattle assumed certain positions in the herd, which they usually maintained throughout the trip. The same one or two of them invariably took the lead place, and continued at the head of the herd day after day. In the front half of the herd, directly behind these natural leaders, came the strongest, the most energetic and alert of the cattle. The timid and lazy cattle gradually fell into position at the back half of the herd. These slower ones might be as healthy and sound as any, yet they had to be pushed along, all the way. If any of the animals became footsore, or injured in any way, they would also join the drags at the rear of the herd.

Most of the steers had partners which they liked to run with, and if the two became separated, they would start hunting each other and bawling until they were reunited. Sometimes, one or two cattle appeared to be social outcasts in the herd, disliked and shunned by the other cattle. Others were lone wolves, who consistently sought the outer edge of the herd, trying to be by themselves as much as possible. The two-year-old heifers were the biggest trouble makers, and never did settle down very well to steady traveling.

In ordinary driving, the herd was kept strung out to quite an extent, so that the cattle would not become overheated by bunching up. The longhorns seemed to

know by instinct how to space themselves to the best advantage, as well as how to adapt themselves quite easily to other aspects of the trail.

Toward noon of each day, the animals would start trying to graze, and the swing riders were constantly alert to keep the herd moving until a proper place was chosen for the noon stop, for both men and animals. As noon approached, the cook, driving the chuck wagon, and the trail boss, would ride ahead to locate some spot where there was sufficient fresh grass for the cattle, and water, if possible. A wave of the hat to the point riders would signal the direction they were to turn the herd before letting the cattle stop to graze.

By the time the trail riders had come up to the chuckwagon, a lunch was ready for them, and they ate and smoked and rested for a short time, while the cattle grazed. As soon as some of the cows lay down and began to chew their cuds, the trail boss knew they had eaten enough, and the signal was given to move on once more.

An expert trailsman never hurried his cattle in the early morning. Each day was started slowly, with the animals allowed to graze for a while, but only in the direction toward which the drive was headed. For this reason, less mileage was covered in the mornings, six to ten miles being a good morning's drive. This was usually bettered in the afternoon, though the length of the afternoon's drive depended on the distance to water, as a rule.

Cattle are creatures of habit, and it did not take many days of this efficient and careful handling, before the mass of hundreds of nervous longhorns was welded into a manageable herd, which settled down quite amicably to the routine of the trail.

Pike's Peak - or Bust

★ By MERRITT LINN ★

1849—The year of the first great gold rush, the one to California. The following few years were full of fabulous excitement, fabulous riches achieved by many people, and a fever for gold which spread across the nation.

1859—Pike's Peak or Bust! Men with gold fever who had not been able to get to California, or got there and missed the bonanza, were ripe for a new gold rush. The slogan caught on like wildfire, and excited thousands rushed into th foothills of Colorado, expecting to shovel gold from the mountain streams, or hack it freely off the cliffs.

The basis for this extraordinary migration was a meager eight hundred dollars worth of gold dust dug by a party over a period of several months, with back-breaking labor. A band of Delaware Indians, for reasons of their own, or perhaps misunderstanding what was actually happening, started the gold rush by reporting in Lawrence, Kansas, that white men were shoveling gold as if it were sand.

Avaricious migration outfitting stores in Kansas, Missouri and Nebraska added fuel to the flames by encouraging and adding to the rumors they had heard. Industrial America had been in a depression for a couple of years, and business and factories were going bankrupt every day. A first-class gold rush furnished the opportunity for the sale of thousands of dollars worth of supplies to eager-eyed gold seekers.

Then, for some reason or other, the press entered wholeheartedly into the enthusiasm, and with little basis of fact, printed reams and reams of material about the fabulous stores of free gold to be found in the mountains.

In spite of the famous slogan, the destination of the adventurers was a locality some seventy to a hundred miles from Pike's Peak itself. Pike's Peak was merely the great landmark which the travelers could see seventy miles away, which gave them an indication that they were nearing their goal.

The end of the journey reached, disillusionment soon attacked the most hopeful of the emigrants. Hard as they might work, the limit any man could make was about twenty cents a day. The migration reversed itself. "Pike's Peak or Bust" was marked out on the sides of the prairie schooners, and the word "Busted" was painted on. The worn and creaking vehicles struggled eastward.

But all of the gold seekers did not return. The more hardy and determined remained, and kept prospecting. More than thirty years later, in the very shadow of Pike's Peak, were discovered the richest gold deposits ever found in the Rockies, the Cripple Creek gold field. There was gold near Pike's Peak, but it was missed by many miles by the poor, excited seekers of the 1859 "Pike's Peak or Bust" emigration. They were the victims of a stupendous hoax, one of the strangest affairs in all the history of America's gold rushes.

THE END

The SOFT RED SHOES

By Frances M. Deegan

Doc Sample was a most mild-mannered little man. But in his quiet, precise way, he terrorized the wildest bunch of roughnecks ever to hit the bawdy town of Redman.

DOC SAMPLE was a small, precise man whose presence in the lusty rail camp of Redman was invariably a surprise to those who saw him for the first time.

His flat crowned black hat and black broadcloth suit were neatly brushed, his small quick hands were

clean, and his black hair and goatee were trim and tidy. At first glance, he appeared to be completely out of place among the shaggy roughnecks, the greasy Indians, and the bawdy sporting element. But his active figure soon became familiar even to the latest newcomer, and there was something impressive about his business-like authority backed by incisive gray eyes.

When he spoke, men obeyed with unquestioning respect. They never knew when the small neat figure might be standing between them and that final door into the beyond. It happened every day, and more than a few men still walked the dust of Redman thanks to the clever hands and cool brain of Doc Sample.

On a typical summer afternoon when the breath of the desert was a furnace blast of alkali laden wind and the town simmered in its acrid odors, Doc paced along the warped board walk toward the Prairie Rose, bent on a professional call.

A sweating mob milled about the street, restless and sullen as caged animals, hating the sight and smell of each other and powerless to escape. Doc maintained the even tempo of his short, quick steps and the sluggish tide swerved respectfully around the small black and white figure and closed behind him as he went ahead.

Most of them knew he was headed for the bedside of Big Flo, the star entertainer of the Prairie Rose, and most of them hoped he would pull her through. She was suffering from the effects of a lethal knife wielded by a jealous suitor, who was no longer capable of suffering. The indignant witnesses of his attack had seen to it

that there was nothing left for Doc to patch up. The remains were scraped up in a blanket and planted in an oddly shaped hole.

As Doc neared the swing doors of the Prairie Rose, there was a brief snarling scuffle and the solid crack of bony flesh as tough knuckles connected.

"Look out fer the Doc!" somebody yelled hoarsely, but Doc continued his even pace and, indeed, the argument appeared to be concluded. But Doc took one look and knew it was not.

The man stretched against the faded pink front of the Prairie Rose was One Ear Joe Mott, a professional killer; and the rugged, red-faced man massaging a sore hand was Ed Summerfield, railroad section boss. Two of Ed's men had been murdered and robbed months before and Ed publicly blamed One Ear Joe and his partner, Dutch Krank. But accusations and threats had no effect in a country where the law had not kept pace with the march of civilization, and crime and punishment was a matter of individual taste.

Doc Sample paused and looked at Ed coldly. "That was a clumsy play," he remarked crisply.

"He crowded me," Ed growled. "I had to hit him."

Doc glanced at the .45 on Ed's hip, indicating clearly that he thought the matter might have been handled with more neatness and dispatch, and stepped over the sprawled legs of the killer. One Ear Joe's long sweat-matted hair had fallen away from the small pink rosette on the right side of his head where an ear had been, and his glazed eyes and thick lips were half open in a kind of obscene exposure of helpless brutality.

"Throw some water on him," Doc said brusquely, and stepped into the dank, sour smelling saloon through a door held wide by two interested spectators.

ED SUMMERFIELD followed him and elbowed a way through the crowd to the bar where fat Ben Whitfield, local agent for the road, stared at him with bleary eyes.

Ed said angrily, "Don't you never spend any time in your office, Ben? I been waitin' two hours to see you."

"See me now, don't you?" Whitfield mumbled. "Have a drink an' take a good look. An' then get the hell out an' quit botherin' me."

Ed was suddenly conscious of the attentive crowd, and his anger gave way to embarrassment for his superior. "All right, Ben," he said placatingly. "All right, I'll have a drink with you. It ain't important. I can talk to you in your office tomorrow."

Doc shook his head and went on back and mounted the steps at the rear leading to the smothering heat of the upper floor.

Big Flo lay in a stifling room under a rumpled sheet. Her heavy chestnut hair was a damp tangled mass on the gray pillow, and the smell of her sick body mingled with the cloying perfume from the garments scattered about the room. Her attendant was a frowsy blonde in a soiled wrapper who cried out in relief when Doc appeared at the open door.

"Thank goo'ness you're here, Doc!" she chirped. "Big Flo jest keeps a-talkin' about dyin' all the time, till honest, she's give me the snakes!"

"Go wash your face," Doc said.

Big Flo's round blue eyes were blurred with pain and fear and she said huskily, "I'm goin' to croak sure, ain't I, Doc'?"

"What are you worried about?" said Doc, whipping an armful of clothes off a chair and setting his black bag down smartly.

"Lots of things..." Flo moved her head on the pillow whimpering softly. "I kep' thinkin' I'd get to the place where I could quit all this an' start livin' right. Start makin' up for all I done that wasn't...wasn't right. I never meant to die here like this."

"I never heard of anybody dying from a bad conscience," said Doc. "Though it can be almighty painful at times. And I have known cases where the cure was hastened by a purged conscience."

"What's that?" Flo gasped fearfully.

"I have listened to more than one deathbed confession," said Doc, and began cutting away the sweat soaked bandages, "after which the dying person began to show a marked improvement."

"You mean they got well again?"

"Some of them. They all rested easier. Raise your arm a bit."

"Listen, Doc..." The ragged shade over the window flapped angrily in the hot wind and sent a flickering glare across the room. "Listen, I got a fat poke under my pillow. I want you to take it an' see that I get a nice funeral. I can't trust anybody else. I want to wear my white dress, the long one, an' my new red slippers the shoemaker is makin' for me. He'll know. He's makin 'em special out of soft kid for Big Flo."

"All right."

"Doc, shut the door. Even if I don't get well, I want to tell you. Maybe...maybe it'll make a difference..."

BIG FLO'S recital may or may not have counted in the archives of the Hereafter, but it certainly made a difference in the history of Redman. Because it made Doc Sample conscious of his own responsibility as one of the first citizens of the growing town. He now became angrily aware of certain facts which heretofore had been merely a vague annoyance. Such as the fact that out of forty-six buildings in the straggling town, twenty-six of them were saloons and gambling hells, all of which catered openly to notorious outlaws. And none of which showed any inclination to move on toward the fast disappearing rail terminus, as he had expected them to do with the influx of settlers.

Doc came down the stairs in the Prairie Rose with Big Flo's fat buckskin poke weighing down his pocket, and the equally heavy conviction in his heart that the town of Redman was due for a clean-up, with or without the assistance of the duly authorized forces of law and order. And the situation on the silent floor below him was as good a place to start as any. Ed Summerfield stood in a little cleared space with his back to the bar, head lowered watchfully and feet planted for action. Fat Ben Whitfield was nowhere in sight.

But One Ear Joe and Dutch Krank sat at a table facing Ed, and into the silence One Ear rasped, "No two-legged skunk kin slough me an' live to tell it."

Dutch Krank's small red-rimmed eyes shifted as he saw Doc stepping down the stairs and across the floor, and he muttered out of the side of his mouth, "Hold it, the Doc's comin' through."

But this time Doc failed to accept the right of way as he usually did. He stopped square between the two belligerents and said to Ed: "Got something to talk to you about, Ed. Come along."

"Just a minute, Doc." Ed's big face reddened angrily. "I'll be along directly."

"This won't wait," Doc said curtly. "And I'm sure you don't want me to discuss it here."

"What the hell!" Ed said and came away from the bar without taking his eyes from the pair at the table.

"'S'all right, Doc!" One Ear jeered. "You kin take him out this time, but I'll get him. An' when I do, I'm gonna trim both his ears. Not that he'll be needin' 'em!"

Doc turned on his heel and stared coldly at the killer, and said in his dry, precise voice: "You do, and I'll skin you. Remember that. I'll have your hide and the hide of every crook and killer who tries to make Redman a thieves' hangout."

It sounded crazy, of course, but for the moment the assembled hardcases were startled. Up to now, Doc had always gone about minding his own business, making no distinction among his patients. Now he was suddenly taking sides and declaring himself, even though his threats were thoroughly fantastic.

Once Doc had taken the play away from Big Ed, their positions were reversed, and it was Ed who was urging the Doc to leave. The puzzled silence lasted until he had followed Big Ed through the batwing doors.

"You don't have to herd me like this," Ed grumbled as they walked away. "I can take care of both of them—"

"No, you cannot," Doc snapped. "You're too hot-headed to handle cold-blooded killers intelligently. I'll tell you what you've got to do as soon as we get off the street."

DOC'S OFFICE and living quarters were located over the bank and were reached by a covered stairway at one end of the building. The place was as neat and scrubbed as Doc himself, thanks to the widow Kleinschmidt and her two half-grown children, a boy and a girl.

Doc had taken in the frightened family after they had sat in the noisy depot for two days, waiting for August Kleinschmidt who never did turn up. He had written that he had located on a good piece of land about thirty miles from Redman, but even if they had known where it was, they could hardly have managed without him.

It was this adopted family of his that put the final clincher on Doc's determination to clean up the town; but his motives were not sentimental. Doc was no visionary, but a far-seeing man who had chosen this spot to establish himself and grow with the country. He had no intention of tearing up his roots and making a new start in some other community just because a bunch of outlaws overran the town and threatened the peace and security of families like the Kleinschmidts.

His whole future, both professional and political, would depend on the settlers, and it was all too clear that this was no place to raise a family. Not if half of what Big Flo had told him were true: That the desperadoes were terrorizing settlers for miles around, killing and robbing and levying tribute after gleaning information at the sink-holes in Redman. Men like Kleinschmidt vanished and others were forced into submission by outlaw guns, and no word of it ever reached the authorities at the county seat sixty miles down the line from Redman.

Doc removed his hat and washed his hands, and came directly to the point after he and the disgruntled Ed Summerfield were seated. "I have reason to believe," he said, "that an attempt will be made to rob the next pay car that comes through."

Ed snorted in disgust. "Is that all you wanted to tell me?" he demanded. "Hell, we expect that. But it ain't likely to happen. We don't advertise when that car's comin' through. We

switch the schedule every month, an' there's only three or four of us knows—"

"That's three or four too many," Doc interrupted harshly. "One of you has sold out."

Ed held his breath and let it out in an explosive oath. "You sure?"

"The car comes through," said Doc with finality, "on No. 9 day after tomorrow."

Ed got to his feet cursing fluently and stamped to the window, then came back to stand over Doc threateningly. "Who is it?" he demanded.

"That I can't say. But I assumed that you had nothing to do with it. It should not be too difficult to determine which of your three or four confidential employees has got himself hooked in the vice dens and took this way out. Your bull-headed loyalty will cover a great deal; but not, I think, such criminal dereliction."

"I'M NOT tryin' to cover nobody," Ed said angrily. "But as far as your 'vice dens' are concerned, hell. We all give it a whirl on our time off. There's nothin' else to do—"

"There's plenty to do," Doc contradicted coldly. "Those hell-holes just happen to be too handy. What are you going to do about it?"

"Do? Why, I'll..." Ed sat down suddenly and wiped a big palm over his damp face and settled his hat on the back of his head. "Yeah," he said slowly, "that's the whizzer. Even if I went over Ben's head an' notified the home office to change the whole schedule, the information could still leak out—"

"Then your best bet," said Doc, "is to keep mum and keep on the job. That way you stand a chance of catching them, if you don't go hog wild and try to do it all yourself. Meanwhile, I'm going to wire the sheriff to send us another deputy, and hope this one will last long enough to be on hand in case we need him to make an official arrest."

Big Ed got up and yanked his hat down savagely. "You won't need him if I ketch up with those..."

He started for the door and Doc said mildly, "Watch yourself."

Ed had the door open and was halfway through when he turned back to say briefly, "Thanks, Doc."

"Don't mention it," Doc replied dryly.

The town was disappointed when Big Ed left town without finishing his business with One Ear Joe. The outlaw strutted and bragged until even his cronies got sick of it, and then he and Dutch Krank also disappeared.

The next evening, a tall, lanky deputy sheriff stepped off the train and inquired for Doc Sample. After their conference, Doc took him around town and introduced him, mentioning the fact that the deputy, Ham Burley, might be calling for a posse on short notice. The merchants were polite but skeptical. They figured Doc had bit off more than he could chew when he claimed he was going to clean out all the outlaws and discourage vice and gambling.

In the saloons, Doc and the deputy met with a hearty welcome, too hearty in fact. As if the purveyors of vice and crime could afford to humor Doc's sudden quixotic mood, and were vastly amused by it. Some of them even joked about his skinning knife, and asked the deputy if he knew Doc was a man-skinner.

The long deputy grinned self-consciously and followed his half-pint sponsor about, docile as a tame deer. A good many people agreed with the sentiments of a painted harpy in the Golden Spike when she said, "Gee, looka the poor gink! He's got no more idee than a settin' duck. Somebody

oughta tell him how to get home!"

The only people who were genuinely impressed were the Arapaho Indians. They looked on Doc as a true medicine man whose balms and cures were miraculous and whose sage advice on numerous puzzling matters had proved good. Therefore, when Doc told Chief White Tail that the deputy had come to hunt enemies and might want some help tracking them down, the chief believed him and gave vigorous assurance of his willingness to oblige.

THE NEXT night, No. 9 cleared Redman only ten minutes late. Doc and the deputy sat up on the flat roof of the two-story bank building and watched the trail of sparks scooting west across the flats like an earthbound comet, until Horn Butte moved its dark mass between and swallowed the sparks and slowly smothered the panting clatter. The two men stayed there, not talking. The noisy clamor of the town and its hot, fetid breath came up to them in the vast permanence of the night like a swarm of buzzing insects briefly busy at a rotting carcass.

Nearly two hours had gone by when the deputy stirred and got up and stretched his lean length. "Wind's turnin' cooler," he drawled. "Reckon I better start ridin' out that way."

"Wait," Doc said softly into the darkness as if his attention were elsewhere.

The deputy stood there uncertainly, and presently his head lifted and he, too, was straining his ears, peering toward the west. The indistinct chuff-chuff of an engine was coming clearer now, coming back toward the town, its panting slower and more labored. And then the iron horse sent its long shrill scream careening across the night. Three times it wailed, high and indignant, and then the rhythm of the engine picked up speed as the backing cars made the turn around Horn Butte.

The whole town mobbed the depot and men were clinging to the engine and to the single passenger coach by the time the train reached the lighted platform, all yelling different garbled versions of the news.

Doc and the deputy waited inside the cage with the night dispatcher until the train crew had fought their way in through the mob. They got the story while the report was going down the line on the telegraph.

"About three miles this side of Goose Creek," the engineer reported. "Tried to derail us by pullin' the spikes. Might not been noticed if Big Ed hadn't been lookin' fer it. He flagged us down in plenty time."

"Where is he?" Doc snapped.

"He's got a hoss. Went back to pick up their trail. Likely they hid out t'other side of Ball Ridge, waitin'—"

"The blind, stubborn fool! I told him not to do it alone... All right, deputy. Swear in your posse. And put a guard on that pay car. I'll send for White Tail and his scouts."

THE GANGLING deputy was efficient enough once he was given a job to do. He selected five well-armed and mounted cowboys who had ridden in from outlying ranches, and who were only too willing to find an excuse to delay their return.

"I got a half a dozen townsmen, too," he told Doc. "But I figger they're jest goin' along fer the ride. Prob'ly drop out when the goin' gits rough."

Doc nodded. "I see you picked the rail workers to guard their own pay car," he approved. "I haven't been able to locate Ben Whitfield yet, and I expect the Division Superintendent to come storming in here some time tomorrow. He has already started

burning up the wire. Well, that is Mr. Whitfield's problem. You can start riding sheriff. The Indians will pick you up on the other side of Horn Butte. And I know you realize the importance of bringing those men back alive and kicking. We have got to make a public example of them."

"Yeah," the deputy drawled. "That's pervidin' Ed Summerfield ain't already caught up with 'em."

"I'm afraid he has," Doc said softly. "I'm afraid he has."

The Indians found Big Ed Summerfield face down in the ashes of a camp fire in a clump of willows just the other side of Ball Ridge. White Tail read the sign, though it was clear enough for anybody to read. Big Ed had been ambushed, shot three times in the back when he stooped to examine the ashes. His horse was gone along with his .45 and the Winchester he carried. Also —and some of the posse turned away in sick shame from the accusing eyes of the Indian—Big Ed's ears had been mutilated.

Doc heard about it late the next morning when two of the posse returned with the blanket wrapped body roped to a livery nag. He listened to the news coldly and without surprise, but that was when he started looking in earnest for fat Ben Whitfield.

As he searched methodically in one saloon after another, he noted that the tone of the town had changed overnight. It was no longer an aimless cacaphony, but had settled down to an ominous growl, grim and sustained. And though he started his search for the missing agent alone, he was soon trailing a sizable crowd, much to the discomfort of various bartenders and proprietors, whose loud invitations to step up to the bar went unheeded. But none had a grin as sickly and ill at ease as Patch Biller, whose shoddy Iron Rail saloon caught only the cheapest trade. He stood behind the bar with both hands flat on the stained pine board top and said nothing at all.

DOC WALKED to the back room and threw open the door. Ben Whitfield was there alone, crouched over a table littered with dirty glasses and cigar butts, terror and guilt scrawled on his tortured flabby face.

"What are you hiding from, Ben?" asked Doc sharply.

"Not hidin'," gasped Whitfield. "No, Doc, not hidin'."

"You must have heard that One Ear Joe and his pal Dutch failed to pull off that pay car robbery the way it was planned," Doc said distinctly. "But maybe you haven't heard that they got Big Ed when he went after them. What they did to him was raw, Ben. It was worse than murder. Want me to tell you about it?"

"Naw...no, Doc!" His flabby arms moved and a glass rolled and smashed on the floor.

"Then maybe you will tell me something, Ben. Your Division Superintendent is coming in on the noon train. And he will want to know how those bandits happened to pick No.9 out of Redman last night."

The agent stared dully with sagging jaw, but said nothing.

"You see how it is, Ben. Somebody dropped the information. Somebody got to owing a large piece of change in one of these gambling hells and had to get out from under, or else. Of course, the gals sympathized with him and came up with helpful suggestions. And he fell for it and dropped the information. As easy as that. Then all he had to do was sit tight and wait." Doc sighed softly. "Unfortunately, the robbery did not come off. And, consequently, the informer is in danger of being extirpat-

ed by a vengeful creditor. Perhaps you can tell me who that creditor is, Ben. If we knew that, we might be able to save the life of the poor informer who got stuck."

Whitfield's loose mouth opened wide and the shot caught him square in the gullet. Doc was temporarily deafened by the blast, and in the confusion afterward, no one could say for certain who had fired the shot. Doc, himself, seemed to be singularly indifferent about it. He had, of course, proved his point very effectively, and the whole story was there for anyone who cared to look at it and take warning.

It was late that night when the posse brought in One Ear Joe, alive but not kicking. Dutch Krank had managed to elude the posse when the two bandits separated, but it was all the tired men could do to guard their one prize from the snarling mob. The Division Superintendent offered to load the battered bandit on a special and run him down to the county seat, but the mob jeered him to silence.

Dan Sweeney may or may not have been prompted to do what he did then. He was boss of a hell-raising repair crew and his bellow could be heard from one end of the town to the other, and he enjoyed bellowing for an audience almost as much as he enjoyed fighting.

HE CLIMBED up on a packing box and opened his mouth and sound rolled out of him. "All you two-fisted sons of Bashan, listen to me! All that wants to see this yellow-striped, snake-eatin', blasphemous buzzard stand trial right here an' now, yell Aye!"

They roared "Aye!" long and loud.

"You want a trial; you want a judge. There's old Herman Keller wid his white hair an' long beard, looks as near like Saint Peter as any judge you could find. All in favor yell Aye!"

They roared "Aye!" knowing full well that old Herman was deaf and knew very little English. Enthusiastic arms boosted the surprised old man up on the box beside Sweeney, who dropped a brawny arm around his shoulders, and howled, "Hear ye! Hear ye! The honorable court is now in session. Let the prisoner come for'ard. Hands off him, you muck-eaters! Let the depitty sheriff do it legal."

Lighted by flares and lanterns and shrouded in the pall of white dust stirred by trampling feet, the trial went on in the hot night like some scene in the smoking nether regions, attended by grimy, sweating fiends with firelit eyes. But to Doc Sample, looking on from behind the packing box, it was the beginning of the end for the lawless forces that stood in his way.

The prisoner sat his jaded nag, hatless and with head hanging, his hands and feet securely bound and with tremors of exhaustion and terror shaking him from head to foot. One Ear Joe appeared to have shrunk considerably since he last strutted the town, and made no answer to the questions fired at him by the judge's assistant.

When the crowd began to show impatience, Sweeney brought the trial to a hasty conclusion by announcing the judge's sentence.

"...to be hanged by the neck until good an' dead, after which the corpse is to be handed to Doc Sample fer the purpose of skinnin' the hide therefrom fer the purpose of..."

The rest of it was drowned out and the prisoner was hustled to the nearest telegraph pole, where soon after Doc Sample pronounced him good and dead and solemnly received the body.

The following morning, a proclamation was posted on the side of the brick bank building, listing twenty-four undesirables by name and warning them to be out of town within thirty days, unless they wanted the same treatment One Ear Joe Mott had received. It was signed: "Citizens' Committee for Law and Order."

IN THE NEXT few days, two squaws from White Tail's band spent considerable time on the roof of the bank building. And then somebody reported seeing drying frames erected on the roof with what was unmistakeably hide stretched there for tanning.

Before the end of the month, Doc Sample had paid several visits to the Italian bootmaker, between his regular calls, although Giuseppe assured every one who inquired that he had never felt in better health.

And then, on a sultry, blistering day, Doc Sample paced the warped board walk, looking as neat and immaculate as ever, and wearing a pair of soft red shoes. They were uncommonly quiet for new shoes, and yet they seemed to move through the breathless heat of the town like a soundless scream. Every eye was riveted in horrid fascination, as if Doc waded ankle deep in warm blood.

"Son-of-a-gun, he did it!" One fellow slapped his thigh, and began to yell hoarsely, "Hey, Corky! Dan! Come out here. Looka there! Look at what the Doc done to ..."

Once the talk started, it built up into a wild thing, and it soon became evident that a good many hardy souls in town craved a pair of elegant soft red shoes like Doc wore. Bartenders and other inmates of the still crowded drinking and gambling halls began to have a furtive and unhappy look. But Doc continued to walk the town, quiet, precise and business-like.

When he was asked about his shoes, he said merely, "You see them, don't you?"

Two days before the expiration of the thirty days indicated on the now vanished proclamation, Doc had occasion to treat the new agent for the road for an infected hand. His name was Lacey and he was a slim, quiet man who liked Doc and did not believe what he heard about him.

He said, "There seems to be quite a bit of traffic going west from here. More than I expected. We've had a little trouble accommodating them."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Doc said. "I'll have to lance this hand. You've got quite an accumulation of pus there."

"Ouch!" said Lacey. "You think the traffic will slack off after a bit?"

"How many tickets have you sold in the past week?"

"Thirty-two," said Lacey. "Altogether, in the past month, we've sold more than seventy tickets from Redman, to points west. The trouble is, the cars are crowded when they reach Redman, and we have to make room for these extra fares."

"Then I should think," said Doc judiciously, "that it would be to your interest to encourage settlers to stop off at Redman where we have a law abiding town already established, instead of shipping them on to those wild and thoroughly dangerous camps out west. There's plenty of room here at Redman—now."

THEY SAY Doctor Thomas G. Sample still had his soft red shoes when his neatly trimmed hair and goatee were pure white and he occupied the Governor's chair. But, of course, he no longer displayed them publicly. By that time, his reputation was sufficient, without any props of showy nature.

THE END

FLIGHT from the

Eddie and Claudine loved each other strongly. But the desert existed between them like a live, repellent barrier. How much should a man give up?

Hatton sighed tiredly. His eyes were aching from the strain of searching over the sullen expanse of desert. He had to catch them!

DESERT

By H. A. DeRosso

IT WAS AN old thing between them. Hatton thought it strange that it should be something as inanimate as the desert. Yet, it existed there between them like a live, repellent barrier. He could not quite reconcile himself to all its hopeless ramifications, and that knowledge left a sour, needling irritation in Hatton.

He reined in his piebald mare at the trough beneath the clanking, creaking windmill, and the horse instantly thrust its muzzle into the brackish water. Hatton dismounted. He kept looking up at the dreary clapboard house, and it was not long before the girl showed, coming out the door.

She started toward Hatton, walking with long, free-swinging strides. The wind coming in off the desert swirled her long black hair about her face. The loose tan denim shirt still did not conceal the rich fullness of her breasts, and the faded and patched blue levis fitted snugly about her slim hips.

Hatton felt it stir strong as ever inside him as he watched, the anticipation of her nearness filling him with a strange, unwanted annoyance. She came up close to him and, standing on tiptoes, touched her lips to the blond beard stubble on his cheek.

"Hello, Eddie," she said in her throaty, husky way. "What brings you out this way? Still courting me?"

"I'll never give up, Claudine," he said, showing her a small smile. Then the trace of it vanished and the cool imperviousness returned to his face. "I had some papers to serve in Nitrite. Thought I'd stop by here on the way back and rest the mare a while."

"And maybe hold hands and kiss me a few times?" Claudine Gibbs had a deep chuckle in her tone.

"Maybe." Hatton tried to say the word lightly, but it somehow caught in his throat. It was always like this, the hopelessness of the yearning that lived so strongly in him, the whole tangled pattern of it. He felt the annoyance sweeping over him again.

Claudine seated herself on the edge of the trough and motioned Hatton beside her, but he remained standing. She lifted querulous eyes up to him.

"What is it, Eddie?" she asked softly.

Hatton shrugged. "You know. The same thing as always."

Her face darkened. Shadows swirled in the depths of her brown eyes. Her glance averted, began studying the ground. "Why can't you see it my way, Eddie? If you love me, why can't you see it like that?"

Hatton looked off across the desert, at the sand swept along by the wind. Bits of grit kept touching his face. The lonesomeness of the land stretched out before him. The desolation of it sounded in the whisper of the wind. He felt a kinship with all this. It fitted into the pattern of his heart. All his life he had known a strong, unyielding affection for the empty, brooding waste of the desert.

HE WAS A tall man, this Eddie Hatton. He carried his wide

shoulders in a slight, perpetual slouch. His face was thin and long with a predatory hook in his rather prominent nose. His eyes were the cold, gray color of granite. A tawny yellow growth of beard stubble covered the flat planes of his cheeks and rimmed the tight line of his mouth.

"Eddie?" came Claudine's querying voice. "Are you listening to me, Eddie?"

"Sure," said Hatton, taking his eyes away from the vague, purple thrust of the Santos Range in the distant horizon.

"Why don't we go away from this horrible place? Why won't you take me away from here, Eddie?"

"I like it here," said Hatton simply. "I want to live my whole life here. I like the desert." He walked over to the trough, sat down beside the girl. Above, the windmill kept creaking forlornly. Hatton put a hand over one of the girl's and found it cold. "I'm settled here, Claudine. I'm sheriff. I could give you a good home. Why don't you forget all those empty dreams and marry me?"

She moved in close to him, putting her shoulder up against his chest, and he felt the shudder that passed through her. Her widened eyes, luminous with a real, plaguing fear, lifted up to him.

"And live the rest of my life in the desert? I'd die first." Her voice was thick with a compelling fright. Her fingers clawed at Hatton's arm. "How can you stand it, Eddie? The silence of it. The emptiness. The nothingness. Sand and grit and heat. Even the wind seems always to be crying. People shrivel up and grow old before their time. Look at me, Eddie!"

She put her face close to his. The scent of woodsmoke in her hair was strong in Hatton's nostrils. He could see the skin of her face darkened by the relentless sun almost to the point of blackness. Squint lines edged her eyes and tugged at the corners of her wide mouth.

"Look at me," she said again. "Can't you see the change in me, in my face? I'm young, Eddie. I'm pretty. But how long will that last here in the sun and heat of the desert? Think of Mrs. Parnell. They say that ten years ago she was the prettiest woman this country has ever seen. What is she now? Tell me, Eddie, what is she like now?"

HER FACE buried itself in his chest. The sobs shook her shoulders. Hatton patted her back and put his cheek against the silk of her hair. A strange, sad compassion moved in him.

"I don't want to marry you because you're pretty, Claudine," he said gently. "I don't care how you look. I want to marry you because I love you. You'll never be alone, Claudine. We'll move into Silver Springs. We can do that now that I'm sheriff. You wouldn't be so lonely in town, Claudine."

"You don't understand," she cried, face in his shirt. "I don't want to live in town. I don't want to live in Silver Springs. It's the whole country that I hate. Say that you'll take me away from here. Tell me that, Eddie. Say that we'll leave tomorrow. Please, Eddie, please. Before it's too late. If you love me, say you'll take me away from here tomorrow."

"You've got to get used to it," said Hatton. "You've got to get those notions out of your head, Claudine. You've got to live here. You just can't get away from that."

Her voice came, full of a strong, purposeful terror. "I'll die first. I'll die..."

THE PIEBALD mare climbed out of the wash and on to the road to Silver Springs. Hatton pulled in the horse and hipped around in the saddle, looking back at the forlorn buildings of the Gibbs ranch shimmering in the heat waves. He sat thus a while, the poignant, needling recollections running through his mind, and when he turned around again in the saddle, he saw the rider coming down the road.

Hatton waited. The man was riding a hammer-headed roan that was covered with white, brackish dust. He lifted a hand in greeting and reined in the roan beside Hatton.

"Well, well, Sheriff Hatton," he said lightly. "What a devil of a way for you to make a living, Eddie. Don't you have a deputy you could send out in this heat while you sit in the shade of your office?"

Hatton smiled. "Howdy, Ben. What are you griping about? You're the one that really doesn't have to do any riding, yet I see you're out and about."

Ben Bloodworth grinned and gave a sly wink. He nodded toward the Gibbs place. "Just trying to beat your time, Eddie. You don't seem to be doing so good with Claudine."

Hatton's face tightened. He felt a sudden stab of irritable anger. His narrowed eyes studied Bloodworth. The man sat loosely in the saddle, one leg wrapped around the horn. He was a rather heavy-set fellow with broad shoulders and a burly chest and heavy hips. Thick black brows curved archly above his dark eyes. He had pushed his gray, dust-covered Stetson to the back of his head, revealing thick, sweat-dampened, black curls.

"I never knew you to get interested enough in any woman to go sparking her on a day like this, Ben," said Hatton slowly, his voice edged with anger.

Bloodworth laughed softly. "Jealous, Eddie?"

The color touched Hatton's face, bringing the anger stronger to him. "She's not spoken for," he said stiffly.

Bloodworth took out a bandanna and mopped his face. He looked quite serious. "You know what she wants, Eddie. She'll go with any man who'll take her away from here. You're her choice for that, Eddie. But if you don't do it, she'll find someone else who will."

"Like, for instance," said Hatton, "you?"

Bloodworth's mouth tightened, His eyes glinted sharply. His voice was tense. "And why couldn't it be me?"

Hatton laughed. "What have you got to give her, Ben? You've never held a job longer than a week in all your life. What could you give her?"

Bloodworth took his leg down from around the saddlehorn. He lifted the reins in a tightly clenched fist, and a strange, bold purpose showed on his face.

"You might be surprised, Eddie. Yes, I think you will be surprised.. "

IT WAS AN alien, disturbing feeling penetrating through the heaviness of Hatton's slumber. He could not think at first what it was. He could only lie there, drugged from his long weariness, unconsciously fighting against it, feeling it persist at him. And then enough of his sleepy stupor dropped off for him to make out the words: "Eddie! Wake up, Eddie! Can't you hear me? Wake up!"

Someone was shaking his shoulder. Hatton sat up in his bed abruptly, blinking the sleep shadows out of his eyes. He saw that the hurricane lantern had been lit, casting its smoky

light fluttering about the room.

"Eddie! It's tough, damn tough. I didn't want to wake you, Eddie, but I knew you'd want me to."

He was leaning over Hatton's bed, tall and lanky and a glittering excitement flushing his long, bony face. The light from the lantern kept flashing off the deputy's badge on his chest. Hatton took in the perturbation on Al Collins' face and a dull, leaden prescience stirred in Hatton.

"What's up now, Al?"

"The Nitrite payroll. As it was being transfered from the train to the stage at Quartz, Ben Bloodworth—"

"Bloodworth!" the word tore hoarsely out of Hatton. He swung his legs out of the bed, grabbed his shirt and trousers. "Ben?"

"Yes," said Collins, swallowing hard. "He snatched the payroll. Old Dad Murley put up a fight. There was quite a scrap. Ben killed Dad Murley. It all came over the wires from Quartz."

Hatton began pulling on his boots. He could hear the loud thumping of his heart. "How do they know it was Ben? Didn't he wear a mask?"

"In the scrap it was tore off. It was Ben all right."

Hatton got to his feet. He grabbed his shell belt and holstered .44 Remington off the bedstead. He buckled the belt about him, face tight and strained, an anxious fear running through him. His mind just did not want to ask the next question.

"Was Ben alone?" he heard himself ask heavily.

"No. He had a pal, but his mask stayed on. They both left together, though."

Hatton slapped the Stetson on his head. The breath expelled from him in a long, heaving sigh. "Did any one notice which way they went?"

"Yeh," said Collins, swiping at his sweating brow with his shirt sleeve. "They headed east toward the Santos. That's their best bet."

"All right," said Hatton, starting for the door. "Thanks, Al."

"I'll start rounding up some boys. I'll have a posse in no time, Eddie."

Hatton halted in the doorway. "No, Al," he said quietly, "there's no need for a posse. I can handle this alone. A posse is too slow and too obvious. I'll cut across the Devil's Sink, and I can get fresh horses at Morrow's ranch. There's just Ben and his pal. Just the two of them. I can handle them..."

THE DAWN stole in suddenly across the desert. The glitter of the stars overhead died and vanished, and the lavender glow burnished the horizon. For a brief while, the cruel jagged heights of the Santos showed clearly through the desert air, and then the sun rose and the heat waves began to dance and the mysterious, purple veil shrouded the Santos again.

Hatton had swapped his piebald mare for a big, deep-chested sorrel at the Morrow ranch. He had driven the animal hard in the coolness of the desert night, and the sorrel was tired and blowing. Hatton reined in the animal on top of a barren ridge.

He folded a leg wearily about the saddlehorn and let his gaze rove over the sullen expanse of the desert. Nothing showed. Only the stubborn, gnarled growths of mesquite and the soft purple stretch of the sage and the endless accumulation of sand and waste.

Hatton sighed tiredly. He rubbed his aching eyes with his fingers and started to look again. By cutting through the treacherous Devil's Sink, he should have headed them off. They

should be somewhere behind him. They shouldn't have got ahead of him. He'd pounded two good horses, and he should have their flight blocked off from the Santos. But maybe they had just feinted that way and then doubled off in another direction.

At last, he thought he spied something off in the distance. His eyes watered he stared so hard, the tears blinding him. He ducked his head and wiped the moisture away and pressed on his eyes with his fingers. Then he lifted his head and looked off in the distance again.

A thin spiral of dust lifted almost imperceptibly up from the desert floor. A tiny, swirling column of sandy spume moving toward him. Hatton's heart began to pound leadenly.

He sent the sorrel down below the skyline on the other side of the ridge and dismounted. Crawling back to the top of the ridge, he lay on his stomach, watching the slow progress of the dust spiral.

He waited a half hour. The sun had soaked through his shirt, stinging his flesh. The warmth of the sand beneath him had penetrated his body. His eyes hurt from the length and intensity of his stare.

There were two horses and riders moving wearily through the greasewood and sage. Through the shimmering heat haze, Hatton recognized them with a tight, cloying knot clogging his throat. The one in the lead was Ben Bloodworth. Behind him, on the small, wiry chestnut, was Claudine Gibbs.

Hatton edged back down from the skyline and mounted the sorrel. He sent the horse along the side of the ridge, keeping down below the ridgetop. There was an abrupt break in the hill ahead, a small gap, and Hatton steered the sorrel in there and waited.

HE COULD hear the sounds of their coming now. The muted, musical jingle of bit chains, the tired blowing of the horses, the mournful squeaking of saddle leather. Sweat poured down Hatton's face. His heart pounded as loud as a drum in his ears, and a dryness filled his throat.

He drew his .44. The sounds were quite close now. He heard one of them say something, but Hatton could not make out the words. He muffled a silent curse in his heart and touched the sorrel lightly with his spurs.

They hadn't expected anything like this. They had been quite sure of their escape. Hatton knew this from their shocked, startled silence, from the way their faces slackened, from the momentary, dulling despair and unbelief that filled their eyes.

He had the .44 pointed down at them. The sorrel was racing smoothly down the slope toward them. They sat frozen in their kaks, their stunned faces lifted up to him. Ben Bloodworth was the first to snap out of it.

"Hold it, Ben!" Hatton shouted.

Bloodworth had a gunny sack dangling from his saddlehorn. Quickly, he thrust the sack at Claudine. Bloodworth's gun whipped out.

"Beat it, Claudine," he shouted hoarsely. "Get! I'll catch up with you when I'm done here!"

The sun flashed off the long barrel of Bloodworth's Colt as he leveled the weapon. Hatton fired. Bloodworth's gun blared, too, in almost the same instant. The whine of the slug made a vicious shriek past Hatton's ear.

The sorrel had lurched as Hatton had fired, sending his bullet wild. Savagely, he hauled on the reins, trying to steady the lunging, fighting

animal for another shot. Bloodworth was having trouble with his roan, too. The man's angry curses rang out in the hot desert air.

HE HAD THE roan around again and the Colt lifted. Hatton fired between the sorrel's ears. Bloodworth gave a choked, muffled cry. His head dipped suddenly and his grip on the reins slackened, the split lines falling from his fingers. The roan gave a hard, r o c k i n g lurch, dislodging Bloodworth from the saddle. Frantically, he grabbed for the horn, but missed it and went sprawling on the sand. The roan raced off into the desert.

Hatton leaped from the saddle. He snubbed the sorrel's reins to a mesquite branch. He started running toward Bloodworth's prostrate body. Suddenly, the man pushed himself up on his elbows. His strained face showed the agony that racked him. With a groaning effort, he pointed his .45 at Hatton.

Hatton cried out sharply in alarm. Throwing himself to the ground, he rolled over behind the dubious shelter of a greasewood. Bloodworth's Colt kicked sand in Hatton's face.

"Ben," Hatton pleaded, his Remington leveled. "Don't make it tough on me, Ben. Let me take you. Don't make me shoot you, Ben."

Bloodworth struggled up on his knees. Sweat ran in miniature rivulets off his chin. His bleeding chest heaved laboriously. With both hands, he steadied the .45, looked down the long barrel at Hatton.

"Ben!" Hatton shouted, and knew as he cried out that it was no use.

Dully, he squeezed the trigger of the Remington. Bloodworth's .45 barked harshly, but the barrel had already tilted toward the sky. He fell backward, hitting the sand with his shoulders, and lay there quite still.

Carefully, Hatton rose to his feet and advanced. Bloodworth was still alive, but all the fight was out of him. He did not have long to go. Hatton kicked the .45 out of Bloodworth's reach. The man's glazing eyes sought Hatton's face. Bloodworth's voice was barely audible.

"Someone else can love her, too. Maybe even more than you, Eddie..."

AT TIMES the Santos seemed tantalizingly close, and then again despairingly far. Their jagged, serrated heights danced beckoningly, mockingly in the shimmering blue mists enshrouding them. A maddening promise of coolness and rest in their brown and gray peaks.

The sorrel moved along slowly, doggedly under Hatton's insistence. He knew nothing but the tenacious purpose needling him so dully through the heavy torpor gripping him. Claudine was somewhere ahead of him. He had to get to her. He had to get to Claudine.

He kept lifting aching eyes toward the Santos. They seemed to reach nebulous, enticing fingers out to him. He could hear the promise of their coolness singing Lorelei-like in his ears. There would be water in the Santos and shade, cool shade that he could stretch out in. Maybe there would be Claudine, too, if she didn't collapse before she got there.

She was somewhere ahead of him. He could see the sign of her passing in the sand. Lifting tortured eyes, Hatton scanned the land ahead of him, but only the taunting Santos showed.

The sun bore down. It had seared its hole through the brassy blue overhead, and now it seemed as if it were trying to sear a hole through the sand and on through the earth, and

Eddie Hatton was right in the middle of that hole. The heat pounded behind his eyes, throbbed in the back of his head. He was hardly aware of the plodding progress of the sorrel. He kept lifting tormenting eyes to scan the desert ahead, and the cry kept going round and round voicelessly in his heart. Claudine. Claudine...

He hardly realized it when he reached the foot of the Santos. First, there was the almost imperceptible feeling of rising, of an undiscernible coolness. The mesquite and greasewood grew thicker, in greater profusion. Twisted, gnarled greasewood gave off their pungent odor.

THE SORREL seemed to gather strength from the promise of water and rest ahead. Its steps were firmer, stronger. Some of the torpid, pained dullness began to fall from Hatton's mind.

"Claudine," he whispered through parched, cracking lips. "Claudine."

The sand of the desert began to give way to tufts of brown, seared grass. The land kept rising. The mist had fallen away from the heights of the Santos, revealing the cold, cruel, brown crags lifting defiantly toward the burnished sky.

Hatton found Claudine's chestnut first. The horse had given out almost at its goal. It lay with heaving flanks on the ground. It heard the sound of the sorrel coming along, and the chestnut's legs began to thrash. With a groaning, blowing effort, it rolled over on its knees, then pushed up on its feet. But that had taken all its strength. All it could do was stand there, spraddle-legged, sides heaving laboriously, whinnying piteously as the sorrel passed it up.

Claudine's tracks were there on the sand, a crooked, weaving trail going up and over a rocky ridge. Coming down the other side of the slope, Hatton saw her. She was walking drunkenly ahead of him, the gunny sack slung over her shoulder.

"Claudine!" he shouted in a parched, rasping voice.

He saw her pause, then stiffen. Slowly, she turned around to face him.

"Claudine," he said again, slipping off the exhausted sorrel. He started to run toward the girl.

Suddenly, she dropped the gunny sack. Her hand lifted, bringing up the flashing .38 in her fingers. Her mouth contorted. An unreasoning madness blazed in her eyes.

Hatton froze ten feet away from her. "Claudine," he said hoarsely, watching wide-eyed the wavering gun barrel trying to center itself on him.

"No one's stopping me now," she said through dried, swollen lips. "I'm out of the desert. No one's taking me back now."

SHE FIRED. The bullet tugged at Hatton's shirt sleeve. Instinctively, his hand flashed, whipped out the Remington. Then he froze there with the weapon clenched tight, sweat drenching his palm.

"Claudine," he said pleadingly. "Listen to me. You're out of it. I can cover up for you. No one recognized you. Only Ben was recognized. I'll say it was a stranger Ben had picked up to side him, and that he got away. All I want is the payroll. You won't have to be in it at all."

"No one's taking the money away from me," said the girl doggedly. She took a weaving step forward, began steadying her pistol again. "It's my stake. It's what I've always wanted. It's what I need to get away from here. With all this money, I can go wherever I want to. I'll never have to

come back here. No more desert, ever."

Hatton saw the rabid flare glow in her eyes. She was holding the gun with both hands. Now it steadied, took an accurate line on Hatton's chest.

"Claudine!" he shouted desperately, his voice echoing among the hills. "Listen to me, Claudine! You don't know what you're doing. Please, Claudine!"

There was no sanity in her face any more. Just a wild, delirious luminosity that glittered frenziedly in her eyes. Her mouth twisted in a vicious grimace. Hatton saw her finger begin to squeeze the trigger.

HE COULD never comprehend it clearly. He knew that deep in his mind he fought it, but the instinct was stronger than his will. He could not believe it, not even when the Remington bucked in his hand just as the .38 blared. He could not remember willing it, but in that phantasmagorical, muddled instant, his finger had pulled the trigger.

All he knew was that she had fallen down on her knees, her head bowed over her breast. The .38 dropped from her lax fingers.

"Claudine," Hatton cried, rushing forward, catching her as she started to fall on her side. Gently, he laid her on her back. The tears were hot on his face, hotter than the relentless sun beating down.

"Claudine, Claudine," he was sobbing.

Her eyes fluttered and opened. For a moment they were vague and uncomprehending, and then they focused on him. Understanding came to them. No longer did that insatiable madness glare in them

"Poor Eddie," she whispered with gasping effort. "You won't let this bother you, will you, Eddie? You couldn't help it. Promise me you won't let it worry you."

The pain was there full and cloying in Hatton's throat. The sobs choked in him. He bent his head and kissed her hot forehead. She lifted a weak hand and caressed his cheek. A small tired smile crossed her lips. Hatton could hardly hear her words.

"I won't have to be afraid of the desert any more, will I, Eddie?"

Then she was dead. He looked down into her still, worn face and a sudden, overwhelming loneliness and remorse filled him. He looked out over the desert, shimmering and golden and lethally beautiful, full of an ugly, inarticulate laughter.

"No, Claudine," said Hatton sadly, "you won't won't have to be afraid any more..."

THE END

RIDIN' BURRO-BACK

★ By R. Dee ★

THAT CAGEY little critter, the burro, has never received his due. Nobody knows how the burro got introduced into the great Southwest, but everybody knows that at one time or another the burro was the transportation mainstay of the country. Cattlemen will naturally argue this, but talk to prospectors or miners or mountaineers, and you hear another story.

The burro is not only docile, patient and understanding, but he can do things no horse would think of. Where horses can't be driven, a burro will stroll casually. He has the footing of a mountain goat. From a straight beast of burden, a mild riding animal and a slow plodding packer, he has been used to operate mine-pumps, ore crushers, and other primitive machinery. The internal combustion engine has supplanted him in everything, but no engine can have such a gentle, sort of amused-yet-doubtful, look.

Horse Thief Twist

★ By H. R. STANTON ★

WESTERN crimes and crookedness were generally of a pretty straightforward nature, out and out acts of violence or robbery. There wasn't much subtlety about the Western crook. He was just plain crooked in an honest sort of way, unlike so many of our contemporary criminals. But, of course, there were always exceptions.

A prominent rancher in southern Texas worked out a clever scheme worthy of a big city crook. He was a good rancher, but through chance he lost about everything he owned in the way of ranch, cows, and property. All he had left after the officials went through his possessions was about a dozen horses. Looking at the thing coldly, he figured that if he sold the horses on the straight market, he'd get nothing but a pittance. So he figured an angle and got together with a partner.

The partner, by the name of McLaughlin, would pull out with the dozen horses, and he'd stop here and there disposing of the animals one at a time. He'd get ordinary prices and would appear to be a normal horse-trader. Then, about a week or two later, the real owner of the horses would appear before the buyers and claim that they had been sold stolen horses belonging to him. Because he naturally had the registration certificates and could prove legal ownership, the buyers were forced to return his animals. The two crooks would then meet together with the horses and split the take. Then they'd start all over again. Before they were done, they had cleaned up a sizable sum. Things worked fine for a while, with them getting forty to seventy dollars per horse many times over. But, alas, all good things must come to an end—and they were caught. Of course, they were sent up to do time. But it shows very well how ingenious crooks could operate. Is it any wonder that Eastern slicksters headed west to "take the fuzz off the peach"?

Central Pacific

★ By LEE OWENS ★

WE LAUGH now at the rugged hardships the railroads of the old West offered. But just hearken back to a few years before the railroads and think of the trans-continental crossing by wagon or by horse. That was really tough! Any railroad crossing, no matter how bad, was paradise compared with such a trip.

There were two types of trains that made the crossing. One was the luxurious express which averaged about thirty-five miles an hour. This meant some pretty fast traveling across the flat barren stretches of the western plains. The locomotives were the usual wood-burners, comparatively light and frequently knocked off the track by defective rails or a cow or buffalo across the tracks. Nevertheless, they managed to make the journey pretty well.

The coaches were lavishly decorated with gilt carvings and elaborate draperies. The trains were provided with water (iced), with amusement facilities in the form of books, and most passengers carried guns with which they took pot-shots at everything within sight or range as the train thundered along.

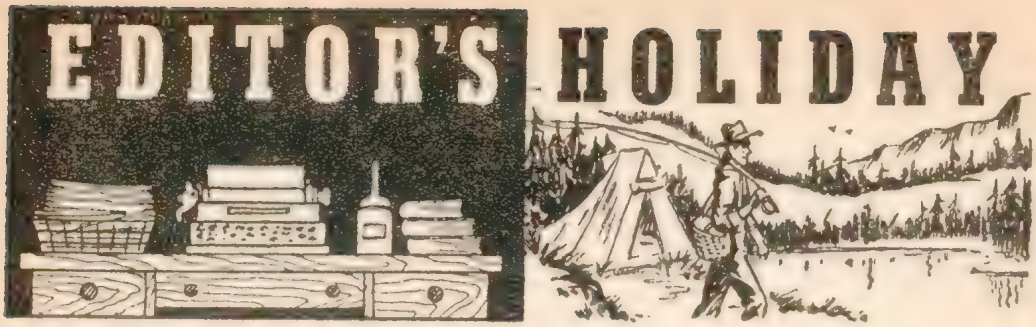
The trains made stops three times a day to allow the passengers to take their meals. These meals were taken in station restaurants at long tables and lasted about twenty minutes. There was plenty of chance for the passenger to stretch his legs.

Some of the cars were even fitted with organs, and many of the passengers carried musical instruments. On one occasion it is said that a cornetist played interminably the song "Home, Sweet Home" until one of the other passengers told him to shut up or pick out some tune praising the place to where they were going!

The emigrant trains were, of course, much slower and not outfitted with the luxury of the expresses. They averaged about twelve miles an hour. This was slow enough to allow gay young blades to hop out of the train at the front, pick some flowers, hop back on the train at the rear, and present their bouquet to some lovely young thing.

Passage for the entire trip was only around fifty-five dollars. This was amazingly cheap for a trip from Chicago to California. Of course, the emigrant trains pulled onto sidings to allow the express to pass in a haze of dust. The trains also stopped at restaurants to allow passengers to dine, but many of the emigrants carried their own provisions and did their own cooking on a stove provided for the purpose.

Passengers were generally separated for sleeping accommodations, first into families, then single women, then single men, and lastly Chinese, who were then working a great deal on the railroad. Peddlers aboard the train sold all sorts of novelties and snacks, much as is done today. A trip across the country via the Central Pacific was quite an adventure.



This is where the editor shirks — and you work! These are some of his monthly problems. Solve them yourself. It's fun!

* * *

THIS LAST MONTH, your editor has been off on a roundup. No, not beef critters. We haven't been gathering in the long horns for a run to Abilene. We've been filling our corral with FACTS. Our desk is piled with books—books—and more books, about early America, east and west. We got a yen to become a real authority on those old rootin' tootin' days, and we sure bit off a mouthful.

But it's fun! It gives you a superior feeling when you go out among ordinary mortals. For instance, you pass a policeman walking his beat, and you think to yourself: Huh! I patrolled the streets of Abilene with Wild Bill Hickok. Bill carried two pistols, a shotgun, and a Bowie knife. This cop's only got a club and one gun. Pretty small punkins!

Fascinating facts—that's what we're full of—and we're going to pass some of them on to you in the form of a little guessing game.

Like this: We'll give you some little known dope on some of the old timers—and you give us said old timer's name—if you can. We won't bother with scoring. We'll just put it this way: If you get 'em all—YOU'RE GOOD. Here goes:

* * *

(1) He was born on May 27,1837, in LaSalle County, Illinois. He served as a scout and a spy for the Union Army during the Civil War. He was so intensely patriotic that he shot and killed a friend of long standing when that friend turned traitor and helped the south. He drifted west and drove a stage over a portion of the Santa Fe Trail, where he had a brush with a cinnamon bear and almost came off second best, killing the bear with a Bowie knife. He was Marshall of Hays City, a place so tough in its time that it made Abiline look like Old Law and Order. Know him?

(2) This was a very great man indeed, and this dramatic incident is all we'll give you with which to identify him: It was an important moment in history; important not only for America, but for the world. This man's subordinates were grouped around him. They had come to hear a message of tremendous import. But instead of reading the message, the man took up a book of humor and began reading aloud to them pass-

ages over which he himself laughed heartily. However, the subordinates did not respond. Their faces remained grave, whereupon the man sighed, allowed the weariness to creep back into his beloved face, and gave them a historic message. Now—who was the man, and what was the message?

(3) Of all the western bad men, one alone can be almost definitely said to have been a result of injustices. He was a fine, sensitive child, with no criminal tendencies whatever, sincerely devoted to his parents. During the Civil War, he saw his parents' property stolen, their home burned by northern raiders in the border country. He saw brutality disregard for human rights, and he took to the Owlhoot Trail. Who was he?

(4) This man spent his days trying to arrange the capture of one of the west's most colorful desperados, but his heart was in Ancient Rome. Know him?

(5) This outlaw was not a product of injustices, no matter what is said to the contrary. Even as a small child, he showed the traits that would later make his name feared. As a child, he was blustering and arrogant; as a youth, he was cruel and overbearing; as a man, he was a cold blooded killer. Think hard.

(6) This man died at 1318 LaFayette Street, a very famous address. Two brothers were involved in his death. He is now generally rated as Number One on the Old Time Western Thug Parade. Give a guess.

* * *

To see how up you are on these early America characters turn to page 133.

SILVER STRENGTH

★ **By Sandy Miller** ★

THE POWER of the Western states can only be appreciated when it is realized how much influence they had on national and even international events. When the silver ores began to flow from Nevada and Colorado, the world sat up and looked. This was something to see. Back in the nineties and around the turn of the century, the world for the most part was on the gold standard. Gold was the standard by which the monetary systems of the world were measured. Then silver began to pour from Nevada's mines—and the world's systems which had really used gold and silver interchangeably, began to question the advisability of even thinking in terms of silver at all.

European countries sent delegates of mining engineers into our far West to see for themselves the richness of the mines about which they'd heard. Their reports to their governments read like a prospectus for a new mine. "Incredibly rich", "unbelievable wealth", and so on went the phrases. Immediately, countries like Germany and France made sure that their monetary systems were measured in gold—not silver. Silver was too cheap. It was a time for trouble.

But this didn't stop the miners. Particularly in Nevada, the mines divulged such wealth in the shimmering metal, that it seemed like a fantasy. Furthermore, where there is silver, it almost automatically follows that there is gold, copper and zinc. These latter metals also have their importance, as everyone knows. At that time, the electrical age was just beginning. Copper began to mean something. If silver hadn't been artificially stabilized, it is likely that it would have become as common as copper in electrical apparatus, or close to it anyway.

The tough western miners had a great deal of sport kidding the life out of the experts who came to examine the mines. A good many of the Europeans had a snobbish, superior air, which was just meat and potatoes to the hardy miners. They knew how to handle snobs. Plenty of fights, lots of scares, and general rough treatment were accorded them. But some of the visiting inspectors were real Joes, who could hold their own with the miners. These visitors got along fine. So it can be seen that they carried tales back to the homelands, not only of the richness of the mines, but of the crude strength of the people who developed them.

Wildcat by the Tail

By W. V. Athanas

All Timmy Stevens wanted was a job and some peace. But Antelope Springs had its own troubles and its own ideas about what Tim really deserved.

THE BRAKES of the long freight were still groaning as Tim Stevens tossed the gunny sack containing his saddle to the gravel. His bedroll followed, and then his own lean length hit the ground.

He stood a moment in the dusty sunshine, a tall man in shabby range clothing, scrubbing the three-day growth of sandy stubble on his jaw with the flat of his hand. He put a hand in his pocket and jingled the two quarters and the one dime that was his entire fortune.

He grunted wryly to himself and stooped to shoulder his rigging. Then he tramped with the awkward stride of a rider afoot, around the stock pens toward this town of Antelope Springs.

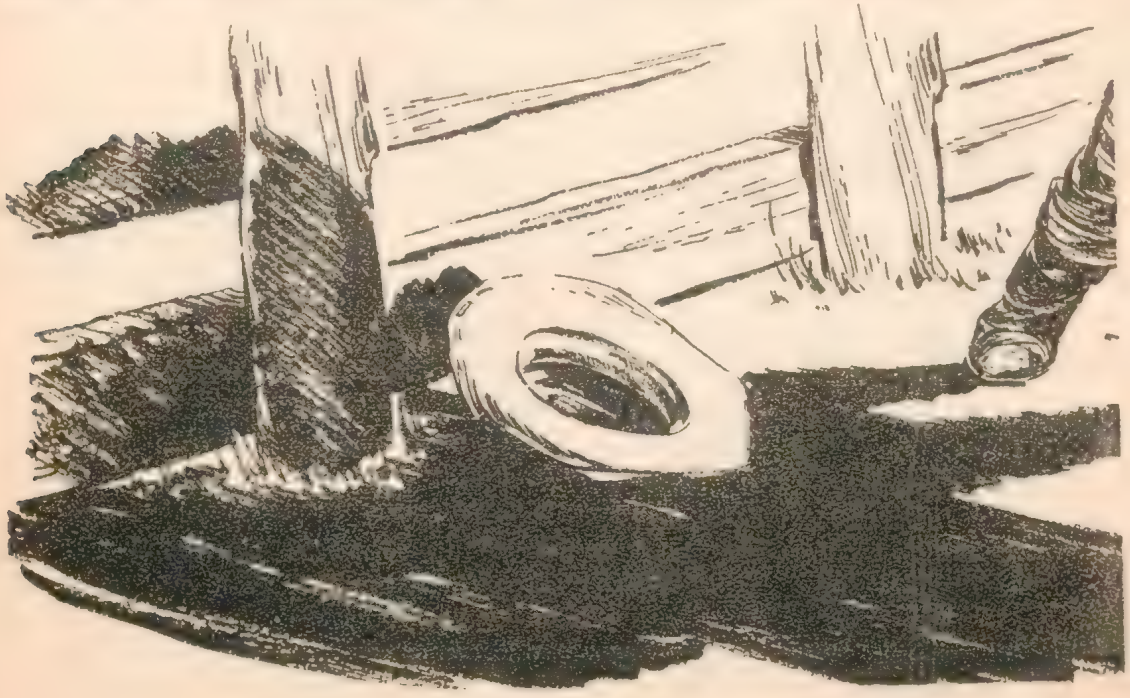
A voice called gruffly, "Goin' somewhere, cowboy?"

There were three of them squatting in the scanty shade of the pole corral, and Tim took casual inventory of them as he answered.

"Yup. Lookin' for an eating place that don't charge a fortune. And if you're connected with Rocker R, I could use a job."

"Rocker R ain't hirin'," said one of the men. He was a big man, bull-necked, thick through the middle. He spat without taking his eyes off Tim, and added, "They's a chink joint up the street. Feed's as good as anybody's. They's also a freight out of here this evenin'. Be on it."

Tim felt his smile fading. "Now



The two fellows held onto his arms tightly, while the big guy with the bull neck kept throwing his punishing fist into Tim's face again and again.

look," he said, "I ain't tromping on your toes. Get off of mine. Man told me Rocker R was hiring, and I need a job, and I don't see that it's any of your say what I do."

The man grinned unpleasantly and humorlessly. "A tough one, boys," he said. "Let's see how tough."

They all rose from their squatting position and closed in, the one with the peaked hat from the left, the one with the checkered calico shirt from the right, Bull-neck from the front. Tim thought bleakly, *this ain't goin' to be funny,* and he threw his punch in a sort of desperation.

It glanced off the broad cheek of Bull-neck. It ruffled the hide and brought the brightness of blood to the surface.

Then Peaked Hat had his left arm, and Checkered Shirt made a clumsy lurching dive on his high heels and wrapped his arms around Tim's right arm and body.

"All right, tough boy," said Bull-neck softly, and clubbed Tim across the jaw with a fist like a maul.

It almost tore his head off. It drove him sideways into Checkered Shirt, and nearly took them down together. Tim could feel the warmth of something running down the side of his face, and there was a great dull roaring in his ears.

Then he saw the other fist coming at him, slow and easy, and with no push at all behind it, but somehow it knocked him over again. The two pulled him up again.

HE SAW Bull-neck stepping into him again, and he knew despairingly that they would probably kill him if they could.

He pulled away from Peaked Hat, and threw his weight on Checkered Shirt, and they went down in a pile. He got an arm free, and clawed at the bedroll, thinking of the .45 rolled inside it. But they fell on him in a clawing, silent fury, and pulled him up again.

Bull-neck hit him again, hit him so hard that he fell into him with the follow-through on the blow, and that was the last one he really felt.

Finally, from a great distance, he heard a thin, reedy voice say, "That's the only way to teach the tough ones a lesson. Leave him there for a lesson for the others."

He lay as they dropped him, with neither the will nor the strength to move, and he did not know for how long.

He was alone, when he finally rolled over, and he squirmed until he could sit up, his legs crooked before him. He braced his hands on his knees and stared stupidly at the slow drip of blood as it fell in thick spats in the dust between his thighs. Some dim corner of his mind remembered the watering trough, and after three tries, he made it.

The shock of the cool water snapped his head up, and he stared with a sort of numb, uncomprehending anger at the pink-tinted stream that ran from his wet face. Then he soused his head under again.

He took a mouthful of water and spat it out, feeling it in every cut and rip in his lips, and he cursed mildly. Finally, he pulled himself to his feet and looked about him.

His bedroll was opened and scattered. His gun and belt was gone, his little buckskin warbag with his shaving kit and trinkets spilled carelessly on the ground. He cursed numbly again.

Why, Timmy? What's anybody got against us? He shook his head clumsily in bafflement, and automatically stooped to pick up his hat and beat out the dust that was trampled into it.

He sat groggily on his sacked sad-

dle and stared at his scattered bedroll, and slowly the puzzlement changed to anger. The warmth of it brought his shoulders square again, and the pain of his battered face was changing to a slow consuming fire.

SLOWLY, HE got up and pulled the bedroll together. He gingerly shouldered his saddle again and he tramped purposefully around the pens and into the single wide street that was Antelope Springs.

All right, Timmy, so they play it three to one. We'll see if we can't play along with them. Now, if we can just find—ah, there it is.

He swung into the door of a little store with one window dominated by a fancy hand-tooled saddle on a sawhorse. He squinted in the dimness of the room, picking out bridles hanging on pegs, belts and holsters in cases, and a rack of guns over the counter in the rear. A wiry little oldster emerged from a curtained door and came up to the counter.

"What'll it—" he stopped as he saw Tim's face. His sharp eyes scanned Tim carefully. "What'll it be for you, mister?"

Tim pushed his hat back on his sandy hair, and mustered up a twisted half smile.

"Got a mighty good saddle here. Ain't got a horse right now, so I'd like to hock it. Cost me a hundred and ten dollars, without the taps and blanket."

The shop owner scratched his head and squinted up at him sharply. Tim knew what he was thinking. A rider sold his boots, or his gun, or his shirt—but he never sold his saddle. Never.

"How much do you need?"

"I'll take a .45 and shells, and five dollars in cash, if it's all right with you. I'll leave my rope, too. That's a hand plaited rawhide twine and it'll hold anything your saddle will. Is it a deal?"

The smaller man regarded him gravely, eyes half closed. "Which side you on?" he asked suddenly.

"Side?" inquired Tim in exasperation. "No side. I'm on my own side. Do we make a deal, or not?"

The man leaned his elbows on the counter. "Now take this as friendly, mister. I don't give a damn about your business, unless it messes in mine. Right now, it's my business to find out why a man comes in here lookin' like a horse tromped him, wantin' to hock his saddle for a gun. An' before there's any deal, I want to know are you Rocker R or Circle B. Do you answer to my satisfaction, maybe we do business."

TIM CLAMPED his teeth on his temper. "Look," he said, "I don't know the riddle. I'm not Rocker R, and I'm not Circle B. I'm Tim Stevens, and I just got off a freight. I got my ears beat off by three birds I never saw before, and I don't like it. I don't like it at all. When and if I meet those birds again, I aim to see if Tim Stevens and one .45 don't add up to about the same as three men to one. And if you don't like it, you can take a flying—"

"Whup!" said the little man behind the counter. He raised a hand to cut him off. "What kind of looking hairpins were these three that jumped you?" The question was casually put, but the old man's eyes were sharp and inquiring.

"One big one, neck like a bull, big nose, black eyes. Looks at you from under his eyebrows like a ringy bull about to charge. Other two were just riders. Hard to describe, but I'd know 'em again."

"Mmm-hmm." The man behind the counter pulled at his lip and frowned. "Just jumped you, eh? Didn't say

nothin' at all? Just jumped you?"

Tim said impatiently, "Damned if I can see what difference it makes. I asked about a place to eat, and if Rocker R was hiring, and then the big one told me to haul out. One thing led to another, and they jumped me. Now then, put up or shut up. I'm getting damned tired of chewing this string."

The man gave him a lopsided grin. Then he reached back of the counter, opened a box and slid a walnut-butted Colt onto the counter. He rattled a handful of cartridges beside it. Then slowly, very slowly, he dealt five double eagles out onto the counter.

"It's a deal," he said, and his eyes were sharp on Tim's.

Tim took in the hundred dollars and he looked at the man with eyes narrowed in concentration. *Something wrong here, Timmy me lad.* Aloud, he said drily, "You ante up pretty heavy."

THE MAN shrugged. "This ain't no penny-ante game. You wanted chips—you got 'em. Go ahead and play 'em. And I'll name your man for you. That big feller that jumped you is Jake Baggot. I ain't going to cry none if you come in here with his scalp on your belt."

Then, when Tim made no move to take the money or gun off the counter, he said, "Well, there's your deal, damn it! Take it or leave it."

"I'll take it," said Tim. But even as he pocketed the money and picked up the gun, he knew he was doing it wrong.

It doesn't smell right, Timmy me lad. It smells mighty like buzzard bait.

But he loaded the gun, under the bright hard eyes of the little man, nodded his thanks and walked out.

He had a meal at the hotel, a good meal with three cups of coffee, and he stopped at the counter for a cigar. He took his time about lighting it. He drew deeply on it, and blew the rich blue smoke out gently.

"Good cigar," he said to the clerk, and dropped a dollar on the case. "Have one for yourself."

"Thanks," said the clerk. "Don't mind if I do." He blew smoke in turn, and inquired, "Just get in?" He eyed Tim's battered face with interest.

"This morning," replied Tim. Then, because he wanted the clerk friendly, he satisfied his curiosity. He touched his cut cheek.

"Engine hit a cow," he said. "I was out in the aisle, and I got piled up on the floor. Damn near tore a seat off with my nose. Hell of a note."

The clerk grinned, and told a story about how a friend of his got a leg broken in a train wreck. Tim paid close attention, laughed in the right places, and made a friend in two minutes.

Idly, he asked, "Who's the old fellow that runs the saddle shop down the street?"

"Him? Oh, that's Knobby Gleason. Does the finest leather work you ever saw. Punchers ride a hundred miles to have him make a set of stirrup leathers or a belt. Pretty nice old feller. Wouldn't like to be in his boots, though."

"No?" said Tim, and drew on his cigar again.

THE CLERK came alert suddenly, and looked at him sharply. "You Circle B?" he inquired.

That's twice now, Timmy me lad. Now, just what the hell is the deal here?

"No," he said negligently, tipping his head back to blow smoke at the ceiling. "Told you. Just got in this morning. Why? Who's Circle B?"

The clerk looked at him closely

again, and then seemed reassured. "Circle B will own this town. Antelope Springs is cows, and nothing but cows, and there's two big spreads in the basin. Rocker R and Circle B. Rocker R run this country for years, and that meant the town, too. But now Circle B, and that's Jake Baggot, is going to be top dog. There'll be a hell of a bust-up one of these days, and it's a dead cinch who'll come out on top." He peered closely at Tim again.

"Range war, eh?" said Tim without interest, and rested his elbows casually on the counter.

"I hope to tell you," retorted the clerk, a little disappointed that his story was having so little effect. He leaned forward impressively and pitched his voice low.

"One of these days," he said, "this basin is going to get picked up and shook like an old gunny sack. And when that day comes, goodbye Rocker R! And that's where Gleason comes in. Him and old Sam Randle, that's Rocker R, they've been friends for years. And he ain't made no bones about hatin' Circle B's guts. When Circle B takes over this basin, and the town, Gleason's a dead duck."

"Sounds like he'd better get over the hill," said Tim, and yawned sleepily.

"Not him," said the clerk positively. "Him and old Sam Randle is cut out of the same piece of whang-leather. They won't run an inch, either of 'em. They're both dead ducks, and won't admit it."

Uh-huh, Timmy me lad! That's the piece of string that ties it all up in a bundle. Timmy, you just walked into something. And you know something, Timmy? You're going to walk right out of it again! Range wars are no place for you, Timmy. People get big holes shot in them in range wars. Your mother had no simpleminded children!

"YOU KNOW," he said to the clerk, "that steak and spuds is bogging me down. If I don't get out in the air, I'm going to fall plumb asleep on you." He sauntered out onto the porch.

He cruised the town, making a casual stroll of it, and when he came back to the hotel at four o'clock, he had his mind made up.

He went up to his room and cinched up the bedroll to a tighter bundle, tossed it on the bed he hadn't used, and rolled a cigarette.

It's been a short ride, Timmy me lad. But they tell me it's a short trip to boot-hill, too. Now, we'll just go see Gleason, give him back his gun and the rest of the money, and tell him we owe him five until we see him again. Then, over the hill for us, Timmy.

He stepped out onto the porch just as the leaders of a trail herd crossed the end of the street, on the way to the stock pens. A point rider pulled up at the crossing point, to keep the critters from swinging in on the street, and sat slackly in the saddle.

Tim cast a professional eye on the stock, and pushed out his lower lip in disparagement. Pretty poor shipping stock: Dry cows, scant two-year-olds, scarred old brush-peppers that had evaded a dozen drivers. Then he saw his man again.

The hefty one—Baggot—stepped out of a doorway and walked toward the rider at the end of the street. He shouted something at the rider, and then in one smooth motion, drew and fired. The rider turned just in time to catch the bullet.

He sagged over his saddle horn, and hung there for a moment, then slowly he slid off to the side, and tumbled down with no more life in him than a sack of potatoes.

In the sudden instant it happened, Tim had time to note the emptiness

of the street. Between himself and Baggot—and the dead man in the street—not a living being showed his face.

He saw Baggot wheel and survey the street sharply, and then Tim dove for his life. For Baggot had spotted him, and in a smooth show of blinding speed, lined his gun and fired. The bullet tore and tossed a foot-long splinter chest high on the wall where Tim had stood.

HE HIT the splintery floor of the hotel porch and rolled, clawing the gun out from where he had rammed it under the waistband of his pants, as he rolled. He thumbed the hammer back and let it drop, and saw dust spurt at Baggot's feet. Baggot's second shot smashed into the door frame as Tim cleared it.

He scrambled to his feet, inside the door, and caught a glimpse of the clerk's bulging eyes and gaping mouth disappearing in haste behind the counter. Then, he was pounding toward the one front window that looked out on the street. He had seen too good evidence of Baggot's shooting to chance a shot out the door.

He felt the ache of his jaw as his teeth clamped together, and there was a roaring of angry blood in his ears.

Just one shot, Timmy. Just one shot at that damned strutting polecat! He chopped at the dusty pane with his gunbarrel, and thrust the barrel through as the fragments jingled musically on the floor. Then three riders in a tight bunch whirled past the corner of the hotel. Tim heard Baggot's gun roar against them, and a voice cry: "To the back, Tex! Rocker R! Back of the Elkhorn!" Then the deep roiled dust of the street blotted out all sight of what was happening.

There was a flurry of shots behind the dust curtain, and then a shrill Rebel yell and two more shots. Tim stepped out onto the porch as the dust reluctantly settled.

Timmy, this is a good time to get shut of this town. He picked up his bedroll and started down the steps.

Then, suddenly, there were three faces confronting him, and none of them were friendly.

Two of them might have been twins. They were thin of nose, long of chin, and hair brushed their collars. They wore high peaked Texas hats, and each had a long Colt that fitted his hand as if it had grown there as an extra digit. The gaping muzzles were directed unwaveringly on his belt buckle.

The man in the middle was just as weathered, but wider and older, with a gray mustache that just matched the frozen color of his eyes.

"Who are you?" inquired this man shortly. There was no gentleness in the tone.

TIM FELT his neck warming, and a muscle twitched in his jaw. *By the holy old pink-toed prophet, enough is enough!* He let the reckless anger run through him and his tone was pitched to the same level as that of the question.

"Who the hell wants to know?" The two watching gun muzzles quivered forward just the slightest fraction of an inch. But Tim was past caution.

"I've had enough of this! I hit this town looking for a job, and I get my head beat off. I try to leave it, and I get shot at. I'm minding my own business, and three of you jump me again, and talk to me like you were calling a dog to heel. Be damned to you! Who I am, and where I'm going, is my own damned business, and if you don't like it, I'll take you one at a time or all together!"

The man stiffened as Tim's hot

words hit him, and for an instant, his lips spread and thinned under the iron gray mustache.

Then he said jerkily, "Stranger, I just had a man shot off his horse here. I've no time for introductions. If you're Circle B, God help you! As sure as my name is Sam Randle, I'll see you kicking in the street myself."

"For the tenth time," said Tim through his teeth, "I'm not Circle B. I'm not Rocker R. I'm Tim Stevens, and I come and go as I please."

Sam Randle said, without taking his eyes off Tim, "Ever see him before, boys?"

The twins said in identical, soft Texas voices, "No, suh."

"All right," Randle said, and they holstered their guns.

Sam Randle trained his eyes hard on Tim now, but he made no note of apology. "You're not our man, Stevens. You might be theirs. Get out of this, Stevens. For your own sake, get out of here as fast as your horse will take you."

"I've got no horse," retorted Tim. "And I hocked my saddle. As long as my saddle's here, I'll be here. I've been pushed far enough."

"It's your hide," said Randle indifferently, and turned away. His two men wheeled with him and they tramped away on run-over heels, with pride in every line of their shabby backs.

AS THE ANGER ebbed away, Tim felt a reluctant admiration come over him. *That old he-rooster's all man, whatever else he might be.*

He watched them down the street, then picked up his bedroll and tramped off in the opposite direction.

He blinked in the gloom of the saddle shop, half blinded by the sudden change from the sunlight outside. He was well into the room before he noticed the strained watchfulness of Knobby Gleason's pose.

His muscles bunched for the turn, and then something rammed into his ribs, hard.

"Hold it right there, friend," came a familiar growling voice. "Just grab your ears with both hands." Then there was a harsh chuckling, with no mirth whatever in it.

"Well, if it ain't my little pal! You learn hard, don't you?"

The pressure eased off, and Baggot came from behind him. Tim half-turned to see him. Baggot grinned—as a wolf grins.

"I had it right, then. I had a hunch old Sam had sent for you, when you dropped off that train. Well, that's all to the good. Sam thinks I'm on the run out of town, so he won't be looking for me. I'll just fix your clock now, you and Gleason here, and then we'll deal our little surprise for Sam later."

"I'm not Sam Randle's man," said Tim, desperately. "I'm..." Then he gave up, as he read the deadly intention in Baggot's eyes. *Timmy me lad, you're just fouled up six ways from Sunday. Take it like a man, Timmy.*

In that instant, he made his decision. He hurled himself sidewise and went for his gun. Then, something tore his head loose from his shoulders, and the world dissolved in a screaming rocket trail of fire.

He came alive with the instant knowledge that his head was an old cider keg—with the hoops sprung, and a stave or two missing. His eyes would not track, and the scuff of a boot on the floor scrubbed his brain with gravel.

"Hell," said a voice in deep disgust, "he ain't daid yet."

"He soon will be," said another voice. It was a grim voice, and faintly familiar to Tim. He tried to open

his eyes, but there was something wrong. He finally managed to get a hand up, and clawed something thick and sticky off his lids. Then he could see a little.

HE LOOKED up into Sam Randle's face. He tried to make sense of it, but the thought seemed to clabber up in his pounding head.

"Baggot," he said stupidly. "Where's Baggot?"

"You'll see him in hell," said old Sam Randle harshly. "Give him my regards. All right, boys."

Tim felt himself being hoisted to his feet. The sudden change of position sent the blood surging to his head, and he blacked out again. He dimly felt motion, and wanted to plead with them to be a bit easier in their handling of him, but he managed only a wordless groan. Another jolt sent burning pain through him, and cleared his head a bit.

"Damn it," he said weakly. "Take it easy, can't you?"

Then, Sam Randle's voice came again. "Take him out," he said impatiently. "Swing the skunk up on the fork beam at the livery stable for Baggot to see. Damn it, I should have shot him at the hotel. Knobby would still be alive if I had."

Tim felt hands under his arms again, and then the words got through. He got his rubber legs under him for a second, and heaved himself away from them with his back against the wall.

"Now," he said, "what is this? What's going on here?"

Sam Randle suddenly shoved his face up against Tim's, his leathered jaw working in anger. "What do you expect?" he snarled. "You come in here and gun down Knobby Gleason in cold blood. Damn you, you're going to swing for it. And I'll pull on the rope myself!"

For a wild instant, Tim thought he might be joking. Then, the steady glare of Randle's frosty eyes persuaded him.

"I didn't," shouted Tim. "I didn't do it! I tell you, Baggot shot me, or hit me, I don't know which. Then he must have shot Gleason. But I'm telling you, I didn't do it!"

One of the Texan twins spoke up. "Yo' gun was on the flo' head, with one cattridge fiahed. Gleason over theah behind the counteh, with one cattridge broke in his gun. You figgeh it out."

SWEAT BUDDED on Tim's brow. "I'm tellin' you," he said desperately. "It was Baggot. He put a gun in my ribs as I came in here and—"

"Baggot's twenty miles from here," interrupted Randle. "We saw him on the run ourselves. It won't hold water."

"But I tell you—" started Tim, and then a saving thought came to him. "Ask the clerk," he said quickly, "Ask the hotel clerk. Ask him who Baggot was shooting at, a half-minute before you rode on him. He'll tell you. Baggot hates my guts, too." He gave a grim laugh.

"You see," he continued, "Baggot thinks I'm your man. Funny, isn't it? I get shot at by both sides, and now you want to hang me. Man, I got a wildcat by the tail. I need help to let go."

Sam Randle regarded him long and carefully, with no emotion at all. Then: "Stevens, you're in this up to your neck. I don't get the connection, but my best hunch is to shoot you and get it over with. But mebbe you're tellin' the truth, and if you are, you better be hightailin' it yonderly at your best gait."

"That," said Tim heartily, "would suit me right down to the bottom of the deck. Just give me five minutes

start, boys, and you'll never even see my dust again. The sooner I get shut of this town, the happier I'm going to be."

"Not so fast," retorted Sam Randle promptly. "You ain't proved nothin' yet. I'll give you a break you don't deserve, but you ain't goin' to get out of my sight 'til this is cleared up. You march right on down to the stock pens with us. And boys, if he bats an eye wrong, shoot first and worry about it later. Now, march!" Tim marched.

They fed him, at the stock pens. Rocker R had brought a chuck wagon, and the cook had his meal on the fire. Tim saw four other men, besides the cook, and all of them were shabby. But every man wore a gun, and it hung handy to his hand.

THEY ATE silently, in the gathering dusk, and then all but one of the Texans and the cook faded off in the night. Tim got water from the cook, and washed the blood off his head, and found a gouge two inches long on the side of his head, just above the ear. Another fraction of an inch, and he would never have awakened.

The steady pound of his pulse clubbed at his head with an agonizing insistence, but he clamped his jaws on the pain and made no sound. He rolled a cigarette finally, and looked over the coals of the fire at the silent Texan. The Texan stared back for long moments.

Finally he asked, "How's yo' haid, boy?"

"Fine," retorted Tim dryly. He puffed on his smoke a while longer.

"Where's the rest of them?" he ventured finally, gesturing at the empty places around the fire.

"Lookin' around," retorted the Texan shortly. His steady regard was getting on Tim's nerves.

Sam Randle loomed up out of the dark and squatted by the fire. He didn't address Tim directly, but he said, "The clerk backs you up. Maybe there's no harm in you. But I'm going to keep an eye on you for a while yet."

He stirred the embers with a stick for a moment, and then made half an explanation. "These culls here in the pen have got to get off. Circle B has bled me damn near dry, and I got to have operatin' money. I can't take any chances."

"I ain't seen you take any yet," said Tim with grim truthfulness.

Randle's grim face relaxed just a trifle. "I don't aim to be hard on you lad, but..."

"Sure," said Tim, and the throbbing pain made him half blind. "Mind if I bed down? I'm beat down to a nubbin."

"Yonder's your bedroll," said Randle. "And your saddle. I had one of the boys fetch 'em down."

Tim grunted his thanks. He pulled the tie strings loose, and unrolled the tarp and blankets. He ran a smoothing hand down them and barked a knuckle on something hard. His hand fumbled, and then came up with the gun, the one that he had got from Gleason. The smooth walnut butt was infinitely comforting to the hand.

He sent a sharp glance over the fire, but no one was paying much attention.

Now, what about this, Timmy? Did one of them forget it here, or is this just Sam Randle's way of apologizing?

He sent another glance around the fire, and then shrugged and slid the Colt under the skirts of his saddle. He crawled into the blankets and let sleep come over him like a warm dark blanket.

SOMETHING hit his throbbing head like a club. He groaned, and rolled in his bed, and had his eyes half open when it hit him again. Only this time there was a blinding flare of light with it that left him blind for a moment. He heard the jingling clump of a spurred and booted man running near him, and then a bellow from Sam Randle.

"The pens! Rocker R—the pens! They're dynamiting the pens!"

Another flash and roar followed on the heels of the shout, and out in the dark a pistol bellowed twice. Tim left his blankets as if they were hot. He came to his knees in the dark, the gun poised in his hand.

He heard one of the Texans cry out in a half-sobbing voice that dripped with the lust to kill, "Wheah are they? Dammit all, wheah's a little light?"

There was just the faintest of glows coming from the coals where the cook's fire had been, and Tim was earnestly seconding the Texan's profane question.

What the hell do you shoot at in the dark, Timmy? Then he remembered the big storm lantern he had seen swinging from the tailgate of the chuckwagon.

He took it at a crouching run, wincing at every running stride as his head was jolted, and nearly ran headlong into a rear wheel. He groped frantically for a moment, and then sent a silent little prayer winging as his hand struck the glass chimney of the lantern.

He snatched it off the hook, found the filler spout and twisted out the cap, then heaved the whole thing in an overhand swing at the faintly glowing coals of the fire. He saw it hit, by the embers that scattered, and then he cursed silently and desperately when nothing happened.

THEN CAME a whooshing roar, and a pillar of fire jumped ten feet in the air as the kerosene was touched off. The lantern was a big one that held nearly a quart of oil, and it flared with prodigious size and brightness.

There came a triumphant Rebel yell and a steady rolling drum of a .45 being fired as fast as the hammer would fall.

A terrible cacophony of pain came from the burned and torn cattle in the pens, a blubbering nerve-twisting bawling that sent screaming little slivers of pain and anger through Tim's skull.

He caught the glint of light on the teeth and eyeballs of a man just in the fringe of light, and the twist of movement as the man chopped at him with a sixgun. Timmy knew him, in the split second it took to swing his own weapon into line, as one of the men that had given him the beating, and he squeezed savagely on the trigger, as if the force of his own muscles would speed the bullet.

He heard the bullet smash into the man, and a savage thrill went through him as the man threw his gun wide and piled in a huddled heap.

One down, Timmy, was his savage thought. His eyes fought and resented the flickering light. *Where's Baggot? Dammit, where's Baggot?* Then he saw him.

He came pounding out of the darkness by the corrals, on a huge gray horse, his broad face working as he roared orders to the three hard riding men siding him. He carried a Colt poised in his right hand, and he chopped savagely with it at the thin square-shouldered Texan who stood in his road.

The slug smashed the Texan to the ground, and Baggot pulled up to fire once more into the body. But then a hail of lead swept one of his men

from the saddle. Baggot gave vent to a roaring curse and fired once into the darkness as he put spurs to his mount. Two bounds put him into the rim of darkness. Then Tim moved on him.

ALL THE boiling anger and frustration of the past day put strength to his legs, and he sprinted from the shelter of the chuckwagon squarely into Baggot's path.

He brought up his gun and dropped the hammer as he ran. The great gray horse screamed and reared as the .45 bellowed beneath its very nose, reared and whirled—and planted a hoof on Tim's saddle, still lying where he had left it.

The horse fell heavily, in a clash of riding gear, and Baggot rolled clear, quick as a cat despite his great size. He hit on his broad shoulders, made no effort to check himself, continued with it until he was on his knees, facing Tim.

"Damn you!" he cried in his deep growling voice. "Damn you!" And his gun came up and bellowed.

The impact of the lead swung Tim half around, and the wind went out of him in a great gust. Then, grimly, he pulled himself back into line. He thumbed back the hammer, let it drop. Then again and again, until the hammer clicked on an empty.

Baggot took it, took all three of the slugs through his broad chest. But he would not die. His wide face twisted with the effort of it, but he forced his gun hand up, even as he had to brace his weight with his free hand. But the gun muzzle wavered, and his slack lips dropped away from his clenched teeth.

"Damn you," he groaned. "Damn you. I should have killed you. I..."

His head fell forward and his arm gave beneath him. The lids fell over his hating eyes. Jake Baggot died.

TIM SAT heavily on his saddle, and pressed a hand to his side. His aching head refused to stay poised on his rubbery neck, and he let it hang forward.

He became aware that someone was stooping over him, and he tipped his head back to look. Old Sam Randle stood over him, a gun in his hand.

"Stevens," said Sam, "I'm sorry."

Tim realized dimly that this much from stiff-necked old Sam Randle was worth more than a flowery effusion from an ambassador.

"Sure," said Tim vaguely, and pulled himself up painfully.

"Here, lad. You hurt?" There was quick concern in Sam's voice.

"I'm all right," Tim answered tiredly. "His bullet just cut my belt and took a little hide off me. 'Twould have been a good gut shot, a few inches over."

He fell on one knee by his bedroll and started rolling the tarp and blankets together. His head ached fiercely and the gun, where he had rammed it into the waistband of his trousers, was gouging at his ribs.

"Well," ventured Sam Randle, "you was lookin' for work when you came, you said. Rocker R can use a hand or two now."

"No, sir!" retorted Tim positively. "All I want to do is shake the dust of this place off my feet. I'm..." And Tim Stevens fainted dead away.

Sam Randle peered from over the dipper he was using to slosh water on Tim. "Lad," he said, "you'd better stick around awhile 'til you heal up. You're in no shape to travel."

"All right," said Tim. He sat up and felt his head gingerly. Then he grinned wryly. "I'm damned," he said "if I ever went to so much trouble to land a job before. And Mr. Randle, if you ever see me hock my saddle again, you kick me, will you?"

THE END

GHOST RANGE

By Clifton Adams

THAT DAY, Jeff Morley made another trip to town. He came back in the afternoon, carefully skirting the ranch house, not even looking in its direction. He rocked unsteadily in the buckboard. The skies wavered, and the horizon tilted sickeningly before his eyes.

Around the grassy slope that hid the ranch house from view, onto the new trail that led across the open range, and finally into the shallow valley where a creek ran. The horses stopped in front of a squat one-roomed cabin. It had been a bunkhouse for his line riders a long time ago, but now it was where he lived.

Jeff Morley climbed down from the buckboard and panted. His lips were cracked and dry and his insides were on fire. His hands trembled as he unhitched the horses and turned them loose. Then, leaving the buckboard where it was, he picked up his box of supplies.

His supplies! Jeff Morley laughed.

He made his way into the cabin with the box in his arms. He set it down and began tearing at it with eager fingers. He was tired to the bone, and his eyes ached, and his nerves screamed for sleep. But there was something he needed even worse than sleep. He took a quart bottle out of the box, pulled the cork with his teeth and splashed whiskey into a tin cup. He downed it and shuddered and poured again.

Ony then did he go to his bunk and lie down, and forget.

It was the next morning when he awoke, with the sun slanting in the doorway. He lurched up. The room tilted. Sickness swept over him, then went away, leaving nothing but emptiness in him. He opened another bottle and poured again.

There was no way of knowing when he first became aware that he was not alone. It was a long time before he finally sat up in bed and stared at the world with bleary eyes.

A voice said, "Mr. Morley?"

Then he saw her standing in the doorway. He didn't know who she was or what she wanted, and he didn't care.

She said, "Mr. Morley, may I talk to you?"

Jeff got to his feet. He swayed and wondered vaguely if he was dreaming, or crazy, or maybe both. His tongue was thick in his mouth. He made his way to a wash stand in the corner of the cabin and drank a dipper of water to put out the fire that was in him.

"Sure, you can talk," he said finally. "There's no law against it."

She hadn't moved. Jeff watched the light strike her hair and seem to spray up in a yellow mist. She said, "I want to buy your ranch."

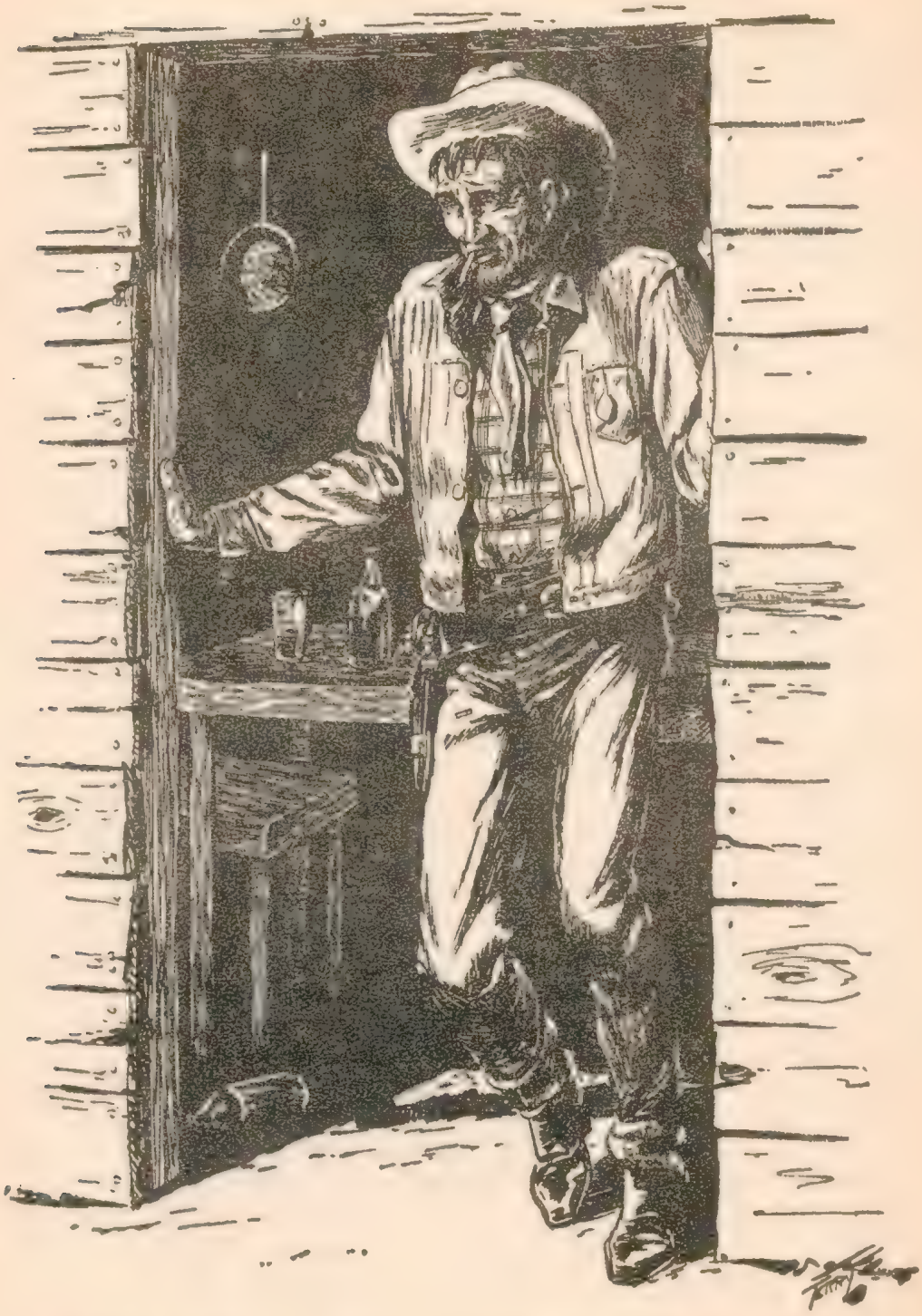
"It's not for sale."

"I have the money, if that's—"

"I said it's not for sale!" he almost shouted. The words came out cold and hard. He moved heavy feet to the cook table, sloshed some more whiskey into a cup and downed it. He leaned on the table and breathed hard. "Look," he said, "you've had your talk. Now go away and leave me alone."

HER FACE got red, but she didn't move. Jeff felt unreasoning

When a man loses what he cares for most in this world, there's no point in living. At least, that's what Jeff Morley felt. Until, one day . . .



He lurched to the door in a stupor, and everything seemed to sink away from him

anger boil in him. He snatched the cup and flung it blindly. "Get out, will you! Get out...and let me alone!"

For just a moment, she stood there. Then Jeff closed his eyes, and the room began to rock, and the floor rolled, and he heard her voice as if it were far away. "You're drunk. You're...disgusting."

Then she was gone, and none of it seemed real. He didn't even remember what she looked like. He had a feeling that if he had reached out to touch her, he wouldn't have felt anything.

A day went by. Or two days. Time didn't matter. He was sick and the room swam with fever—but that didn't make any difference either. He could close his eyes, and he could forget.

Then, one day in the darkness, he knew she was there again. He could feel her there in the cabin, he could hear her move. He opened his eyes and looked on a sick world, and she was beside him.

She raised his head and held something to his lips. "Here, drink this."

He drank and it was good. He lay back and felt better. After a while he said, "What are you doing here?"

"If I didn't come back, I knew you would drink yourself to death. I didn't want that on my conscience."

He mulled that in his mind. Then he remembered something. "You wanted to buy the ranch," he said. "Why?"

She looked at him strangely. "Have you decided to sell it?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't make any difference."

She had cleaned the room and left some broth on the stove, and then she was gone. Jeff lay in the cabin and wondered about her... And then he began to remember other things. He got out of bed and found the whiskey.

The next day she came back. She came in a buckboard, bringing the horses to a stop under the big cottonwood in front of the cabin. Jeff lurched to his feet and the room seemed to sink away from him sickeningly. For a moment, he stared into the cracked mirror on the wall. A drawn, bearded face with hollow eyes stared back at him blankly. At last he staggered to the front of the cabin and swayed in the doorway.

"All right," he said thickly, "tell me I'm drunk. I'm disgusting."

She didn't say anything. She didn't even get down from the buckboard. For a moment, Jeff's mind wandered vaguely. He stared down toward the creek, and up at the grassy slopes that were so bleak and useless without cattle. And finally he looked at her, and seemed to actually see her for the first time.

She wasn't pretty. Her face was too serious, and her eyes were too wide apart. She seemed to have grown out of the earth, tall and stringy. She didn't seem angry, or disgusted that he was drunk again. Her face only looked tired, and her eyes a little sad. At last she said, "I see now that it was all a mistake. I'm sorry I bothered you."

Suddenly, Jeff laughed at nothing. He held to the door facing for support and licked his tongue around his cracked lips. "Sure, a mistake. Now, whoever you are, get out of here and let me alone."

SHE LOOKED at him with a strange sadness. "You must have loved her very much," she said.

Jeff stared. Sudden anger welled

up, but there wasn't enough strength in him to keep it alive. It died almost as suddenly as it was born, and there was only emptiness.

"Yes, I loved her," he heard his voice saying. "Her name was Nora. She was as clean as the sky and fresh as morning and she went to my head like wine. We lived in the house on the hill. The range was ours, and it was good to us. We had everything."

The words rushed out, dry and cracked. They were words that had been locked in his mind for a long time, and they were a little mad. A small breeze rattled the leaves of the cottonwood, and Jeff went on: "When she died, everything went with her. I tried to keep the ranch going, but it fell to pieces in my hands. I couldn't live in that house without her, I couldn't even look at it. I moved down here."

He closed his eyes and memories came out of the darkness the way they always did. He listened to the memories for a long time, and when he finally opened his eyes again, he was amazed to find the woman still there.

She said quietly, "Why don't you go back to the house—why don't you take the ranch and build it again?"

Jeff Morley laughed. "Build it with what? It's run down, and the stock is gone, and the riders won't work for nothing."

"You could borrow the money. From the bank, maybe."

"What banker would be crazy enough to lend money to a drunkard? Who would risk money on a ranch that was already smothered with mortgages?"

He went back into the cabin then, and in a little while she was gone.

He didn't remember much about the next two days. The world was blurred and misty, and reality and dreams were mixed in his numb mind. Then, on the third day, the whiskey was gone and he began to wonder... about a lot of things.

This woman, the one who had helped him while he had been sick, he didn't even know her name. Why had she bothered with him? Who was she, and where had she come from? There were a lot of questions in his mind, and no answers.

She had said something about wanting to buy the ranch. But what did a woman want with a ranch? There was no answer to that, either. There was only the throbbing in his head, and his insides were nervous and crawling for want of more whiskey.

But for some reason, he didn't go back to town for more, the way he had always done before. For one thing, he would have to hitch the horses, and that was a job he always hated. He hated all horses, and he was afraid of them. For it had been a horse that had killed Nora. He had told himself a thousand times that it was crazy. He couldn't expect to run a ranch if he was afraid to ride. But that didn't stop the cold sweat from oozing out on his back every time he had to look at one of the beasts.

But still, there was another reason for not going after the whiskey. It kept pulling at the back of his brain, and then he remembered what the woman had said. *Why don't you go back to the house? Why don't you take the ranch and build it again?*

IT WAS more than two miles from the line camp to the ranch house but, without quite knowing why, he had walked it. And now, as the afternoon sun began to burn out and slide to the west, he looked at the place that had been his...and Nora's.

For the first time in more than a year, he stood on the hilltop and listened to the wind moan softly. He looked around him at the range that

had been theirs, at the corrals and barns that were beginning to run down —and finally at the ranch house itself.

He walked to the back door, almost seeing her standing there. He could almost hear her calling to him, but it was only the wind. He pushed the door open and stepped inside quietly, as if he were afraid of waking someone. Slowly, he went through the house, touching things with his hands, remembering what they had been in that other life that had belonged to him and Nora. Finally, he went back to the kitchen and sat at the cook table where she had served his meals. He sat there for a long time and wondered if he could really take this ranch and build it again.

MARTIN RIGGS was the president of the Lamona Bank. He was a little man with apple cheeks, and a wide smile that never managed to get as far as his eyes. He leaned forward on his big flat-topped desk and he said, "Jeff, you know it's impossible to make another loan on that ranch of yours. It's covered with mortgages now." Then his smile widened a little. He thought about those grassy slopes and the water on Jeff's range that made it a perfect place to raise cattle. "But maybe we can do business, anyway," he said. "I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll take up the mortgages and give you two thousand dollars cash for your outfit. What do you say?"

Jeff said, "No, thanks, it's not for sale."

The little banker spread his hands and sighed. "Well, that's it."

Jeff kept his voice level as he tried to convince the banker for the last time. "Look, Mr. Riggs, up until now I wasn't considered a good risk. But I haven't had a drink in a month. I can run that ranch and make it pay —but first I've got to have some money to stock it and hire hands."

Jeff stopped and saw it was no use. The banker was wondering how a man could run a ranch when he couldn't even ride a horse. Jeff got up slowly and walked heavily to the door without saying any more.

People thought he was crazy, and maybe they were right. He had been practically born on a horse, the same as everybody else in this cattle country. He didn't understand his fear, he only knew it was there. Every time he saw a horse, he saw the pain in Nora's eyes. It was bad enough riding in a wagon, like a nester. But cowmen wouldn't understand that.

If for a little while he had had confidence in himself again, it was gone now. He went outside and started down Lamona's plankwalk toward the nearest saloon. There was no bitterness in him for the banker. The only bitterness he held was for himself.

HE FIRST saw her when he reached the end of the block, waiting for a freight wagon to pass —the same woman, the same buckboard. She smiled and moved the horses over next to the plankwalk. Only then did Jeff notice the boy sitting beside her.

"Mr. Morley..." She hesitated a moment and seemed to wonder if she should go on. Then, "I saw you coming out of the bank and I was wondering..."

Jeff shook his head. He tried to smile, but it felt crooked and misplaced on his face. "The bank didn't think I'd be a good risk." Then, because of some sense of politeness, he added, "I'm afraid I haven't been very civil, the times we've met. My name is Morley, but I'd feel more comfortable if you'd call me Jeff."

She smiled again. "I'm glad to know you, Jeff." Then he learned that her

name was Sanders—Lorain Sanders—and the boy beside her was her son. Somehow, Jeff hadn't been ready for that. For the first time, he wondered how old she was. Twenty-four—twenty-five at the most. She seemed too young to have a six year old son.

And then, because his eyes must have asked the question, she said, "My husband died with the fever in Mexico. He was an engineer, and I guess we never had what you could really call a home. You are probably wondering what a woman and her son are doing alone in Lamona. We're looking for that home that we've never had." She hesitated again, as if she were wondering if she should talk so much. Then she went on: "You see, that was the reason I came to you that first day. Your ranch, somehow it seemed just right."

Jeff didn't say anything, and she went on: "Have you changed your mind about wanting to sell it? I think the insurance money I have..."

Jeff said, "No, I haven't changed my mind."

"Perhaps you could lease it to us. And you could live on where you are now if you like."

Jeff stared. It was a crazy idea, but maybe it would work. He was going to lose the ranch, the way things were going—but with the lease money, maybe he could somehow stave that day off. Anyway, it would be enough to keep him in whiskey. He thought about that for a long time; another woman living in Nora's house. Somehow, that didn't seem as bad as having the house fall to pieces, or falling into a banker's hands.

He said at last, "It's crazy, but... I think we can do business."

THE NEXT week, Lorain Sanders and her son, Robert, left their boarding house in town and moved into the house on the hill. A week later there were cattle on the range—not many, but it was the start of a herd.

That was crazy, too, like everything else about having this woman on his ranch. Putting money into cattle when she only had the place leased for a year. But, crazy or not, Jeff was glad she had done it. He liked to stand in the doorway of his shack and see the cattle up on the slope and imagine that they were his, and Nora's.

But sometimes it wasn't like that. Sometimes he got to thinking too hard, and he remembered that he would never be a rancher any more. He didn't have the guts, or the backbone. He was a drunkard, and that was all he would ever be, because he had lost everything when he lost Nora. Jeff Morley laughed, and it sounded hard and bitter in his own ears. He couldn't even ride any more. He opened a fresh bottle, and the world became bleary and fogged, and reality slipped away, and finally there was nothing.

He seldom saw this woman who lived in his house on the hill. He only left his shack when his whiskey ran out. Or when Robert came to see him.

It's funny how a kid like that can get under your skin. A kid with freckles as big as dimes, and a grin all over his face. A kid too young to care whether a man has guts or not. Jeff didn't know why Lorain let him come to see him—but he was glad she did. Somehow, when he was with the kid, all the other things didn't seem to make so much difference.

Maybe the kid reminded him of the boy he would have had, if Nora had lived. He wasn't sure. He only knew that when he and the kid fished in the creek, or made traps for the prairie chickens, or just lay back and looked at the sky together, then he found some kind of peace that he hadn't

known was in him. It was on such a day that the world fell.

It had started out like a lot of other days, with one of the riders bringing the kid down to the cabin behind his saddle, leaving him until the afternoon when he would pick him up and take him home the same way. It had started with laughing and fishing in the creek. They had tramped a long way, all the way up to the bend in the stream where the banks were high, and the kid had been scrambling in front of him, along the edge.

Jeff had said, "Watch it, Bob. If you fall in the water and get wet, your ma will switch us both."

The kid had laughed. He had turned to watch Jeff coming behind him, and he turned his face to the sky and laughed just because it felt good.

SUDDENLY, the laughter was no longer laughter. It was a cry of fear. Jeff seemed to freeze as he watched the loose earth give way under the kid. He heard the scream as the kid plunged down. Then the scream stopped abruptly, and there was only silence.

Jeff's legs were working, he was running without knowing it. He made a leap for the kid, but he was too late. He reached that crumbled piece of earth and he saw the kid lying below him, near the edge of the water. Jeff slid down the bank, scattering clods and stones. He grabbed at a willow branch and brought his fall to a stop.

"Bob...Bob, are you all right!"

The kid didn't move. He lay crumpled against the stump of a cottonwood. There was a cut in his head and blood was beginning to well up and spread over his face. Jeff knelt and went over him hurriedly for broken bones. His arms and legs were all right. There was only that cut in his head, but there was no way of telling how bad that was.

Jeff wet his handkerchief in the creek and mopped the kid's face. He still didn't move. His eyes were closed, and his faint breathing was the only way Jeff could know he was still alive.

Jeff felt his insides go cold, and he fought panic and tried to think. He had to get the kid out of here and back to the cabin. He had to get a doctor. Then he remembered that they were a long way up the creek. If he went cross country, he could reach the ranch house in the time it would take to get to the cabin.

He picked the kid up gently and started down the edge of the creek until he found an incline in the bank that he could climb. He walked woodenly, with the kid in his arms and his mind shocked and numb. What if the kid died? He tried to put that out of his mind, but the thought was there, and he couldn't put it away. How could he tell Lorain?

For the first time, Jeff was beginning to think of Lorain as somebody other than the kid's mother. He tried not to think anything. He walked and waited desperately for the kid to move or show a sign of life. There was nothing.

Jeff imagined that even the skies had grown dark and brooding as they looked at the frail, still form. He imagined that a cold wind came out of nowhere bringing the angry smell of storm. And then he knew it was not his imagination at all.

In the east, dark thunderheads had rolled over the horizon, and up above, long stringy clouds were being shredded by wind. Jeff walked faster, and his breathing came hard as the slight form he carried got heavy in his arms. The clouds moved swiftly until they covered the land and made it dark. Then, lightening split them

open and heavy rain started to pour.

The kid moved for the first time, restlessly and murmuring as Jeff held him.

"It's all right, kid," Jeff panted. "You'll be home in a minute and everything'll be all right."

BIG DROPS of rain smacked the prairie, squirting up little feathers of dust. The drops got thicker, and finally the rain whipped in cold sheets around them. Jeff slogged through it, as small trickles came together and formed streams that rushed across the prairie. His clothes were soaked, and water formed on the brim of his hat and poured down his back like cold fingers.

Jeff walked. His arms ached and his chest burned, but he held the kid close and walked. And somehow they made it. He reached the rain-swept hill where the house was. He made his way past the corrals and the barns, to the back door of the ranch house.

Lorain must have seen them as they came across the back yard. The door came open suddenly and she started out toward them, but Jeff shouted for her to go back. She did as he said. Her eyes were wide and her face was pale as she saw the kid in his arms. But she wasn't the kind to get hysterical, and Jeff was glad of that. He came into the house, his clothes dripping and making puddles that ran across the kitchen floor. He said, "Get a bed fixed for him. I'll tell you about it later."

She hesitated for only an instant, then she turned quickly to a bedroom and Jeff followed.

There were no more words until they had the kid in bed. When that was done, Jeff turned to her. "He's going to be all right, just a crack on the head that he got in a fall. But he's got to have a doctor in a hurry. I'll go out to the bunkhouse and get one of the riders started for town right away."

A LONG second went by before she said anything, and in that second Jeff could see the fear that was in her eyes. "There aren't any riders," she said suddenly. "I was afraid the cattle would drift with the storm. I sent them out to the south range to put them up in the holding corral."

It took a moment for him to get what she was saying. No riders. That meant there was nobody to go for the doctor. For just a moment he tried to tell himself that the kid would be all right without a doctor, but he couldn't; he knew better.

"But isn't there somebody here who could make the ride into town?" It was a desperate voice. It was his.

She stared at him for what seemed a long time. At last she closed her eyes tightly, as if she were afraid he would see what was going on in them. "No," she said at last. "There isn't anybody."

She didn't ask him to go. Perhaps that was the reason she closed her eyes, so he couldn't see them begging him to make the ride. More seconds went by, seconds that might be the difference between life and death for the kid. Jeff couldn't move. It wasn't too much to ask, that a man ride into town to save a kid's life. He knew what he had to do, but his insides were tied in knots.

He had to get away from this crazy fear that was in him, this crazy fear of horses that was somehow tied up with Nora's death. He knew that if he didn't get away from it now, he would never be able to look at this woman who lived in his house. And somehow, Lorain had suddenly become important.

He didn't trust himself to speak, for he couldn't be sure what he would actually do. He turned and walked

out of the room. He went outside into the rain and darkness. Almost blindly, he made his way to the barn, got a saddle off a rack and onto a horse's back. Then, without knowing just how or why, he found himself riding out.

It was a long ride into a darkness where slashing rain cut at his face and he hardly felt it. He heard the horse's hoofs as they thudded on the soggy prairie, muffled and far away, almost as if it were a dream. They sloshed across streams, and topped rises, and leaped off into nothingness. He didn't let up until they had reached town, thundered down a rain-swept street and pulled up at the doctor's house.

TWO HOURS went by before he sighted the lights of the hilltop house again. He had sent the doctor on ahead, for his own horse was winded and tired. He rode woodenly toward the barn, and suddenly he realized that he wasn't afraid any more, that he was only tired and anxious to learn how the kid was feeling, what the doctor had said.

He rode the horse into the barn and was pulling off the saddle when he saw her. Lorain was standing there quietly in the corner of the barn, as if she had been waiting for him. Jeff stared for a moment before words would come. Finally he said, "The kid, is he all right?"

She came forward then and stroked the horse absently. "Yes," she said quietly, "he's sleeping now. The doctor just left and said he would be all right."

Jeff took a long, deep breath and the air was good in his lungs.

Lorain said, "I want to thank you for what you did. I think I know how hard it was for you."

Jeff watched her stroke the horse's nose, and expertly take the bit out of his mouth. His voice worked before his mind realized fully what that meant.

"You...you really like horses, don't you?"

She almost smiled then. "Yes. I was born on a ranch. I've been riding since I was a little girl."

Then Jeff saw what she had done. She had risked him to go for the doctor, when she could have gone herself. She had risked a drunkard, a man who had failed at everything...with her child's life.

Lorain must have seen the questions in his eyes. She said, "You see, I know what it means to be suddenly alone. I know it does crazy things to a person sometimes, and it takes crazy things to get them straightened out. That was the reason I wanted you to make that ride. I guess I knew all along that it would turn out all right."

Jeff tried to speak, but there were no words in him. He knew now that she had been right, that somehow that ride had straightened him out. He wanted to tell her that. He wanted to tell her a lot of things, but he couldn't make a sound.

She said, "Now you can take the ranch and build it again. My lease won't last much longer. You can take the place and make it the ranch it used to be."

Then Jeff found his voice. "I think I'd like that," he said evenly.

"If you would stay with me and help me."

And he knew that the days of nightmares were over, the days of watching the ranch fall to pieces, of depending on whiskey for strength. He held her, and all the strength he needed, or would ever need, was in his arms.

THE END

Shepherders' Tally

★ By A. W. O. LOWRY ★

IT IS NO reflection to say that the cowboys and sheepmen of the old Southwest did not have much formal education. It is a fact which in no way detracts from their capabilities. An interesting example of this lack of formal training is shown by the hundreds of sheepherders of New Mexico—and this wasn't so very long ago.

Not very many of the sheepherders were able to figure with numbers much above ten. Simple counting to this value was the height of their skill. How then did they keep track of the thousands of sheep they tended?

The answer is simple: They employed the most primitive and ancient of all number methods—the methods of the tally and the tally-stick. On their fingers they counted two for each finger; that is, a pair of sheep for each finger. When ten fingers had been used up—that is, twenty sheep counted—they would make a notch on a wooden stick. After all the sheep had been treated this way, the stick would be turned over to the head sheepman who would just count the notches and multiply by twenty. That method is not far removed from what primitive flock-tending men must have done.

This lack of formal education applied, of course, to reading and writing, too. Cowboys and sheepmen would very often make every effort to be friendly with a man who could read and write so that he would do their letter reading and writing for them. But behind such a request was a fierce pride, and it was never possible to look down on such a man for his lack of schooling. After all, he knew things that the average bookish character didn't.

It must not be forgotten, either, that many a hard-working cowboy, either through his own efforts or through friends, taught himself the rudiments of "readin' an' cipherin'". The cowboy was a hard worker—even if he didn't have book training or schooling.

One-Gun Man

★ By LESTER CHANEY ★

IN SPITE of all the stories and tales about the typical two-gun Westerner, the average cowboy was content with a single weapon. Certainly, this was true of the working cowboy, although maybe the lawman liked his two-gun specialty. But one gun was enough for the hard-working cowboy whose real duty was rounding up steers and cows, not shooting sixty villains and marrying the ranch owner's daughter. A lot of bull has been told about the cowman.

The .45, of course, was the cowboy's favorite weapon, but there were plenty of variations on this, too. Some men liked .38's mounted on a .45 frame. The reason for this was the lesser kick of such a gun, and consequently, the greater accuracy. Many cowboys liked a gun with a shortened barrel—not exactly a belly-buster, but still considerably shorter than a standard gun. Such a gun could be concealed easily. What would now be called a police pistol .38 was common on the range. Its lightness again.

A favorite trick of gunmen, which hasn't received much attention in fiction, was the habit of badmen—and some ordinary cowboys—of carrying a six-shooter, usually a .38, in a special pocket sewed under their chaps. It would be well-hidden so that the stitching wouldn't show. With this arrangement, a cowboy could stand facing a man, with his hands held innocently behind his flaring leather chaps, looking the very picture of harmlessness. But in reality, his hand would be wrapped around the butt of a gun, and at the first hostile move, he could twist the muzzle upward and start slinging lead. It was a handy, if a rather treacherous, arrangement.

A common cowboy practice was to sleep with a gun. A cowboy would go to sleep with his knees sort of doubled-up and carrying his gun between them. Then, if he was aroused by anything from a deep sleep, he could come up shooting. Even in the dusk when cooking supper, it was very common for a cowboy to keep his gun in his hand. It was a favorite practice of crooks to hold up cowboys at that time, when the man would be afoot and supposedly unprepared. But the wise cowboy kept his gun in his hand, and at the first command to reach for the sky, he could do so, but with a spitting six-gun in his hand.

Cowboys carried guns less for killing and murdering than for their everyday chores, such as killing snakes, giving warnings, driving cattle ahead of them, and for general protection. The average cowboy carried a gun and knew how to use it because he figured it was the thing for a wise man to do and know. Many a time, a cowboy pinned under a dead or crippled horse was able to summon help just because he had a shooting iron which would make lots of noise. A gun was a friend and a necessity, not primarily a tool for shooting humans.

Destination Doubtful

By H. B. Hickey

Fifty howling redskins raced toward them, their rifles blazing. Ken looked long at the letter in his hand. Then he took up one gun for himself and handed the other to the girl.

It was one painted face after another now as Ken's guns kept bucking. The shotgun up above was blasting away, too. Now, it only depended on how long their ammunition would hold out.

FLAGSTAFF was only sixty miles away, but it might as well have been sixty thousand. This was a journey that would never end in arrival. The stage hit the bottom of the wash with a rush, and the wheels were fixed in the ruts and screaming a song of speed as the driver lashed the horses to get all the momentum he could for the pull upward.

It was going to take all the speed the driver could work up, and more, because above on top of the wash there were fifty howling redskins racing to converge on the stage when it pulled out of this. That would be in about two minutes. But two minutes sometimes stretches pretty far, and a man can do a lot and think a lot in two mintues.

Ken Silvers took a long last look at the letter he held, then slipped it into his pocket. He had unbuckled his gunbelt. Now he held one gun, handed the other and the belt to the girl who sat facing him. He nodded to the grizzled miner who was poking the snout of a rifle out the opposite window.

"Good shooting," Ken said.

"Yeah," the miner grunted. He was saving his breath.

Ken swung his gaze to the girl. "Do you know how to load a gun?"

"Yes," she said.

"As fast as you can," Ken told her. "And be sure to save one for yourself."

He grinned at her then, to take the sting off that. "Now kiss me, and make it a good one."

Her free hand splatted against the side of his face, turning it almost as red as the blush of her own.

Then they were on the upgrade and Ken turned from her. He laid the barrel of his gun across the window sill. He took a last deep breath and thought once more about the letter in his pocket. And he thought once more about this girl who sat facing him, thought how much he had come to love her, thought back to six hours before when he had seen her for the first time...

HE WAS sitting on the rough bench outside the hotel, reading his letter that had been folded and unfolded so many times it was beginning to tear. The girl was at the other end of the bench, next to a large trunk and a leather bag, both of which obviously were hers.

Ken hadn't noticed her when he sat down, and even now he would not have looked up from his letter except for the sudden flurry of activity at the other end of the bench. There was movement and there were voices, one feminine and the others gruff.

"Now, don't you worry," one of the gruff voices said, "I'll take care of this trunk for you."

"Please—" the girl started to say.

"See?" the other rough voice barked. "The pretty lady wants *me* to take care of her trunk.

"I don't want either of you to help me," the girl told them. "The agent will take care of this trunk. Now, please let me alone."

She was firm enough to show she meant it, but it was obvious they had no intention of letting her alone. They got more insistent and she was getting frightened, when Ken finally became aware of what was going on. He looked up and hastily slipped his letter into a pocket.

It was a couple of rough looking customers, Ken saw. They were big and burly, with faces at least a week unshaven. And neither of them was as drunk as he was pretending.

"Hey!" Ken snapped. He got up in a single smooth motion, like six feet of spring steel uncoiling.

"Keep your nose out of this," one of the men told him.

They were too contemptuous of Ken. He was as tall as they, and if not as heavy, at least as wide in the shoulders. And at thirty five, there was a mature hardness about him that showed even in the glint of his grey eyes.

When he came up close they split, so as to hit him from both sides at once. But this was not Ken Silvers' first fight. A long stride took him around the first man, placed the other directly behind his partner.

Ken ducked a wild right thrown at his head, came in past it and pistoned his fists against his opponent's stomache. The man folded neatly and Ken almost tore his head off with a smashing uppercut.

By that time, the second man had gotten around, however, and his own fist landed hard on the side of Ken's head. Ken tried to roll with it and failed, and an instant later a knee crunched against his jaw. He went down, flat on his back, and saw a foot slanting toward his face.

Ken twisted his head, just enough to let the foot fly past, and a moment later his opponent discovered that the kick was one of the worst mistakes he'd ever made. For Ken's open palm was slapping the moving heel just hard enough to keep it moving in an arc. The burly man was off balance. Then Ken's own foot lashed out and caught him just behind the knee.

In an even fight, there was no con-

test. Ken's fists were balled leather, his hands moved with whiplash sharpness. He snapped out his left hand and connected with an unshaven jaw. His right hand came after like a bolt of lightning. The fight was over.

A MAN CAME at a run around the edge of the hotel. He was short, stocky, and a tin star glittered on his vest. The Arizona sun was a furnace that made him stop to wipe perspiration out of his eyes, and after he'd opened them he blinked several times, as though in disbelief.

"Ken Silvers!" he gasped.

"Hello, Matt." Ken put out his hand and the other took it.

The sheriff looked down at the two unconscious men and grinned. "Well, I'll be durned. Looks like you ain't forgot a thing in six years."

"Maybe even learned a thing or two," Ken said. Then, "You been down to Flagstaff lately, Matt?"

"Two months ago," the sheriff said. "She's fine, Ken. And say, she's just as pretty—"

"Don't tell me. I'll be seeing her myself in a few hours, and I don't want the edge taken off."

Then he was looking past the sheriff and his own eyes went wide with sudden fear. His own leather bag, which had been lying at his feet when he got up, was gone.

"My bag!" he gasped. He started to run, but the sheriff caught his arm.

"It's all right, Ken. It's just around the corner of the hotel. My deputy and me were walking along the back, and we saw this fellow come scooting around, and somehow we knew it wasn't his bag he was running with. I grabbed him, and then was coming back with the bag when I heard the fight. I dropped it so's I could run faster."

He disappeared and returned a moment later with Ken's bag. And it was only after Ken had the bag safely in his hand that he realized the whole thing had been a plant, and it was then he had his first real look at the girl.

She was still sitting on the bench. Ken looked her up and down slowly, noting the chiselled fineness of her features, the clear blue of her eyes, the copper hair that peeked from under her bonnet, and especially the way the red ran into her cheeks at his look.

"No," he said, "I guess not."

"You guess not what?" Her voice was cool, almost fearful. This was a girl who hadn't seen a great deal of violence, and the last few minutes had upset her.

"I guess you're not in cahoots with those two there," Ken told her. He grinned suddenly. "That rummy was sure right about one thing, though. You are a pretty lady, all right."

It seemed impossible that she could blush even more, but she did. Beside Ken, the sheriff spoke up.

"Ken didn't mean anything out of the way, Miss Allison. It's just that here in the Territory, folks speak kinda direct."

A moment later, he was performing the amenities. The girl was Sharl Allison, and her father was head of the garrison at Flagstaff. She was on her way to join him there.

"Only," the sheriff said at that point in the introduction, "you're not going to join him today."

"Why?" Ken demanded, beating the girl to the question.

"Because there's war smoke on the peaks, and this time the red men ain't fooling. The shotgun guard just quit. And the driver says he'll drive the stage as far as the hotel, but no further. All of you'll just have to put up here until things quiet down."

AGAINST the afternoon heat, the horses bowed their heads. The stage stood still in the dusty street. From the top of the coach, the driver spat once, then started to clamber down. And next to Ken Silvers, the agent bellowed imprecations long and loud.

"What's the difference?" Ken said mildly. "Tomorrow's just as good as today."

The agent glared at him. "This thing is getting worse, not better. If you want to get to Flagstaff soon, you'd better go today, because otherwise you won't go for at least a month."

"A month is too long," Ken said.

"You bet it's too long. I've got government mail and papers in this sack. If it don't move for a month, we lose our franchise. And if that happens, I don't care if you walk to Flagstaff, 'cause I'll be lookin' for a new job."

He turned to glower at the driver. "Double pay if you get back up there!"

The driver got back up. "For double pay," he said, "I'd drive through hotter country than this. But I gotta have two shotguns."

"One is all I could hire," the agent said. He waved his hand and a man came out of the hotel and stood beside him. The man looked capable.

The driver watched the man clambering up, shrugged and nodded in agreement. Ken looked at the agent and the agent's stare was a query.

"I've waited six years," Ken muttered. "I can't wait another month."

He lifted his heavy bag and threw it into the stage. Next to him a grizzled miner said, "I've been waiting a lifetime for the news I've got in my pocket. Guess I'll ride along."

That left only the girl. She nodded to the agent and he and another man lifted her trunk and bore it toward the coach.

"Wait a minute," Ken said. "You can't let her make this run."

"I can't stop her, either," the agent said. "She's paid her fare, and if I prevent her from riding, I'm in hot water again. If she don't ride, none of you do."

"You're all being melodramatic," the girl said scornfully. "My father wrote me this country was quite safe."

HER FATHER had underestimated the Indians, Ken was thinking. And she was just a silly Eastern girl who didn't know what the end of this run could be.

But she was still a pretty girl, and as he put his letter back in his pocket again, Ken could not help staring at her. It was far easier on his eyes than the sun-baked, barren scenery that flashed past the windows.

"She must be very dear to you," the girl said suddenly, and Ken knew she was referring to the letter he had just put away.

Ken nodded, and the girl said, "I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you say you've been gone six years. That's a long time."

"Too long. But I got what I went for." He picked up the bag at his feet and it made a metallic sound. "Nothing but the best from now on."

Then abruptly he said, "Sharl, if you don't mind my calling you that, I think you are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Her cheeks flamed again. "And I think you are at best a cad and a scoundrel! With one woman waiting for you—"

"Well, now," Ken interrupted. "I've got a big heart. Room enough for two."

He grinned at her, knowing what was in her mind, and she turned her

eyes away. At least she was a decent woman, Ken thought, and where he'd spent the last six years, there had been few enough of those. Where he'd spent the last six years, a man with a bag full of money would have had the women clawing each other's eyes out to get to him.

Yet, this girl was not immune to a handsome man. Every once in a while Ken had caught her eyes flickering with interest at him. He fought a losing fight with himself, fought to keep himself from getting involved, and knew that he had to fan Sharl Allison's interest.

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "Now, suppose we just talk. It's better than burning your eyes on that desert."

Eventually, she had to talk to him. She could not keep staring out the window. And there was only the miner besides Ken, and the miner had fallen asleep and was snoring. He was not a lovely sight.

Several times, Ken told himself he was eight different kinds of a fool. He knew what she'd find when she got off the stage at Flagstaff, and he knew what that would do to his chances. Yet he kept on talking. He told her about the six years, about the trail herds and the boom towns, and if he left out some things, it was only because she'd find out soon enough what a man had to go through to accumulate what he had in his bag.

He wished now that he hadn't taken this coach, wished it desperately, because Sharl Allison was not just a silly Eastern girl. She was an intelligent woman, a warm woman, a beautiful woman, and the longer he talked to her, the deeper he was becoming involved.

Yet, all the time there was a wall growing between them. He saw it in her eyes, and when with startling abruptness she turned away from him he understood. But while it was not too late for her, it was already too late for him. He had to tell her how it had been; it was hard to explain.

"I want you to know something—" Ken began.

"I know as much about you as I want to know," she said, and her tone had gone cold again.

He would have insisted, would have shouted to make her listen, but it was too late for that. It was too late for anything now. For from out of the heat and the golden haze there came the crack of a rifle, and when Ken looked through the window he saw a single Indian horseman far to the right. And then up ahead there materialized a double line of braves, all of them racing to intercept the stage.

The miner had come awake with an instant awareness, and his rifle was already in his hands. Up above there was a shout, and then the crack of the whip. Ken looked across at Sharl Allison. Her face was white as chalk and her lips had gone dry. Ken thought she was going to crack up. He was wrong.

"I'm sorry," she was saying. "If not for me, this wouldn't have happened."

This was the kind of woman a man wanted by his side. This was the kind of woman Ken Silvers would have wanted any time. But six years and what had gone before, couldn't be erased.

Ken took a long look at Sharl Allison, as though to memorize her face, as though a memory like that could carry over to wherever he would soon be. Then he got out his letter for the last time. There was no face to memorize there, only the handwriting...

NOW THEY were coming out of the wash. Now they were on the upgrade and the scream of the wheels was gone, and to take its place there

was a worse screaming. This was a a screaming intended to freeze a man's blood so that he could not even aim a gun.

Ken Silvers grinned tightly and spit once across the barrel of his gun for luck, then once more for extra luck. Then the stage was completely out of the wash and there was a painted face dead in his sights and his gun was steady in his hand. The gun roared and the face vanished, only there was another face to take its place.

It was one painted red face after another now, a whole line of them bobbing and weaving and strung out endlessly. The gun in Ken's hand bucked six times and then it was empty. He passed it back without looking behind. Another gun slid into his hand, and when that was empty he passed it back and received another.

She was all right, Ken thought, and the only time he had to worry about her was when he heard a moan of pain. He stole a look then and saw it was the miner who had been hit. But Sharl had already ripped her dress to make a bandage for the miner's arm, and a moment later there came again the high whine of a rifle.

Up above, the shotgun was blasting away; the man who used it was all right. The driver was all right too, Ken thought. For from out of nowhere he had produced a fresh burst of speed that temporarily pulled the stage ahead.

But Ken was missing more shots than he would have liked, for a bucking stage does not provide much steadiness of aim. The only thing which had seen them through this far, Ken knew, was the fact that a horse plunging over rough ground provides even less steadiness.

So far they had been fortunate, but fortune is like a long lane. Eventually it has to turn. The turn came when he passed an empty gun and received a full one. But this time he heard a deep breath sucked in.

"We're running out of ammunition," Sharl said. "That's the last loading."

It was as though his heart had stopped for a second. Then he looked at her quickly. "Did you save one for yourself?"

She shook her head and he said, "Don't be a fool!"

He laid a single bullet in her palm and then he was back at the window. Perspiration was running off his forehead into his eyes and mingling with the powdery alkali dust on his cheeks. It was through a haze that he saw at all, and through that haze it seemed the number of Indians had multiplied, although he knew they must have got at least twenty.

Their luck had run out. Up above, the shotgun was silent now, and the line of horses was swinging in very close. It seemed like an age between his own shots, for he was trying to make each one count.

Then it was more than an age. Something burned across his scalp, and after that the whole thing was like a clock running down. Everything was seen through that golden burning haze, and the stage was going so slow it seemed to be plowing through mud.

The line of Indians was going that slowly too, one painted face after another, only further and further apart. Ken pulled trigger and this time there was only a click. He let the gun fall out of his hand.

And then crazily, impossibly, the line of painted faces was fading off. It couldn't be true, but it was. And over and through the golden haze there was the high, clear note of a bugle beginning the call for a cavalry charge.

There was another line now, a line of blue clad men with sabers flashing in the sun. Then the stage was grinding to a halt. The door burst open and a trim, military figure was reaching past Ken for the girl. The trim man was frankly crying.

"Sharl," he said, "I found your letter when we came in from the field, and I knew you'd be foolish enough to take this coach. I was afraid we'd be too late.

The shotgun guard was missing, and Ken was leaning against the side of the stage, his breath coming in gasps. Up above, the driver was bent over the reins, his head on his chest; the miner lay back nursing his arm and cursing softly at the pain.

"How far did they chase you?" Colonel Allison asked.

The driver lifted his head and looked around. "Twenty miles," he said.

Twenty miles, and it seemed more like a thousand. But it was all over now. The blue clad men were coming back and soon they'd all be in Flagstaff, and the thing would be over.

"Twenty miles," the colonel echoed. "And only four of you." He stared at Ken. "You have a steady hand, sir."

"HE'S A very brave man, father," Sharl said. "If not for him, I think I'd have died of fright."

It was a nice thing for her to say, but it didn't mean any more than that, Ken thought. He was a brave man, and he was a cad and a scoundrel. She'd forget that part of it now, but even if she forgot it forever, there was still enough to kill his chances.

For the next forty miles, he tried to keep his mind off that. He sat across from her and tried not to see her. And after they were close to Flagstaff it got a little easier to do, because first there was the town looming ahead, and then there was the crowd which had heard the news that ran ahead of the stage.

And in the crowd there was a white haired woman and a little girl with pigtails.

Ken was out of the coach in a single jump. His big hands shoved men out of the way and his ears were deaf to the questions they threw at him. Twenty feet were exactly as much as twenty miles had been, but now he had covered them.

"Ma," he said to the white haired woman.

Then he was on his knees in the dust and holding out his arms and the little girl with pigtails was coming between them.

"You're my daddy," she said.

"I'm your daddy," Ken whispered, and knew how it was the colonel could cry.

The crowd was around the driver now. Ken had the little girl by the hand and they were walking away, she looking up into his eyes and he down into hers. Two people crossed their path, a woman and a trim man in a blue uniform. Ken looked ahead.

"Miss Allison," he said, "I'd like you to meet my daughter."

"Your daughter?" She stared at them, seeing only the white haired woman and the little girl. "But where—?"

"My wife ran off after she was born. It wasn't her fault; she was tired of being poor. But I made up my mind that Cathy'd never be poor, so I left her with my mother and got out of here."

"I'm sorry," Sharl Allison said, and this time it was more than just words. "But the letter—"

"It was my daughter's first letter. Can you blame me?"

Then he completed the introduc-

tion he had begun: "Cathy, this is Miss Allison."

"She's a pretty lady," Cathy said with a seven year old's frankness. "And she's wearing such a pretty dress."

"You'll have pretty dresses, too," Ken said. "Lots of them. And maybe Miss Allison will help you pick them out."

"I'd like that very much," Sharl said. She was blushing again, but smiling now, and looking straight into Ken's eyes. "I've always wished I had a little girl like you to pick dresses for."

THE END

Dangerous Escape

★ By LOUIS L. WARREN ★

ONE OF the oft-told tales of the cattle country is the story of how Bill Wilson and Oliver Loving escaped from the Comanches, while trail driving a herd of longhorns, though Loving died soon after arriving at safety.

The two Texans, together with cattleman Charles Goodnight, had joined their herds, for protection from the Indians, and were trailing them northward together. From the Brazos River over to the Pecos they drove the cattle, in dreary and almost constant rain. Denver had been their destination, but because of the bad weather they decided to try to get rid of the stock sooner. Goodnight agreed to remain with the herds, while Wilson and Loving rode over to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, to try to sell the cattle to the Indians thereabouts.

The country through which the two men were to ride was dangerous, being infested with hostile Indians. The experienced Charlie Goodnight warned them to travel only at night. The cowmen set out, but were too impetuous to be cautious for long. By the second day, they were riding boldly in the daylight hours.

Of course, the Indians observed them, and soon the two riders saw a war party of over a hundred Comanches coming directly toward them, fast. Wilson and Loving left the trail and rode toward the Pecos River, four miles away. They barely had time to scramble from their horses and find a hiding place among the bushes of the river's bank, when the Indians were swarming all about them.

Cautiously, the men moved toward a better place of concealment. They were seen, and the Comanches fired. A bullet went completely through Loving's wrist, entering his side. Wilson desperately emptied first his gun and then Loving's at the Indians. Carefully, he helped Loving move into a weedy hollow where, fortunately, the Indians did not see them.

They lay motionless until night came. By this time, Loving's injuries had brought upon him a high fever, and he seemed very ill. Wilson managed to creep down to the river's edge and bring some water in his shoe, so that the wounded man could drink and find some slight relief.

The moon was bright, and until it went down about midnight, the two cowmen had to remain as quiet as if it were day, for they continued to hear the Indians moving all about them. At last the moon set, and the night was black. The Indians encamped along the river banks settled down, and all was still.

Oliver Loving whispered to his companion. He was sure he was fatally wounded, and he wanted to persuade Wilson to leave him at once, not waiting until morning, else he was sure to be killed, too, and no one would know what had happened to the two men. Wilson agreed to try to escape.

He had lost an arm in early life, and this disability made his situation even more hazardous, for he must use the river as his means of escape. He took one gun, leaving the sick man with a rifle and several pistols. Wilson then removed his shoes and outer clothing. He clasped the hand of his wounded friend in silent farewell, picked up the gun, and cautiously lowered himself into the cool waters of the river.

At once he saw that the weight of the gun was a disadvantage to his dangerous undertaking, and so he discarded it, pushing it into the mud of the river bottom in the hope that the Indians would not notice it. Then he allowed himself to float downstream with the current. With Comanches on both banks of the river, it is a wonder that he managed to get by without attracting the notice of any of them. After a time that must have seemed endless to him, he felt it safe to leave the river, and start his long and arduous march toward safety.

The ground was covered with small, thorny plants, and the man was barefoot. Dressed as he was only in his undergarments, he found the sun's rays exceedingly painful. It was a torturous journey. Keeping a constant lookout for Indians, he walked

in the direction of the herds, and Charlie Goodnight. Snarling wolves followed him, but he carried a stout stick, and managed to keep them away. The third day he came upon the herds.

As soon as Wilson's story was told, Goodnight and some of the other cowboys rode to find Loving. They found the spot where Wilson had left him, but they did not find the wounded man.

Several days later they met a party which had come from Fort Sumner, and learned that Loving was at the Fort. He had remained hidden for the entire day after Wilson had left him, and the next night, feeling no weaker, he had crept down to the river. He, too, had floated unseen through the Comanches camped along the banks. When he left the river, he found his way to a trail, and there he lay for five days, too weak to go further, or to hunt for food. A party of Mexicans found him, finally, and took him to the Fort.

Goodnight and Wilson hurried to Fort Sumner, and arrived just in time to say goodbye forever to their brave companion. Fever and loss of blood from his wound, and the seven days of exposure and starvation, had been too much for the cowboy, and Loving died soon after his friends came to the Fort.

Indian Signals

★ By PETE BOGG ★

THE INDIANS eagerly bought all the small, shiny mirrors offered them by traders, as they liked them for personal adornment. They soon saw in the mirrors a new way of communication. When the sun shone brightly, reflections in the mirrors made flashes visible for quite a distance. By prearrangement as to time and number of flashes, they had a very convenient way of exchanging information between warring, scouting or hunting parties.

They also used mirror signals to get the best of the white men. For instance, when ranchers were allowed to pasture herds of cattle upon land within an Indian reservation, they were apt to find frequent evidences of steers having been butchered, but never once did a cowboy catch an Indian in the act of butchering or carrying off the meat of a steer. Yet, each cowboy did notice that he was followed every day, at a distance, by two Indians, who apparently did nothing all day but remain at the same discreet distance, whether the cowboy was riding or had stopped. The fact is, the Indians carried mirrors, and if the cowboy approached too near the spot where the other Indians were killing steers, bright mirror flashes immediately warned them to be on their way with the loot. The Indians felt that they were entirely within their rights, since they were allowed to go where they wished on the reservation, and since the white men had killed off their buffalo and they felt entitled to take what they wished of the white man's steers.

Smoke signals were used extensively by the Indians, also. Green stuff thrown on a small fire caused any amount of smoke desired. Across the plains, or from one mountain peak to another, the columns of smoke could be seen for great distances, and conveyed a great number of meanings. Two columns of smoke near each other meant luck had been good. A victorious war party sometimes simply set the prairie on fire, to let the home folks know they were returning, and give them time to prepare a suitable welcome.

A common danger signal was a large handful of dust thrown high in the air, which the breeze blew into a banner easily seen some distance away. Such a dust signal meant that an enemy was close, so that an immediate battle was now again in prospect.

Another signal used by Indian scouts to the war or hunting party they were with, was a circle ridden on a hillside where the man on horseback could be seen from quite a ways. A small circle meant a small herd or band of enemies discovered, a large circle signified a large discovery.

ANSWERS TO "EDITOR'S HOLIDAY", from page 100.

(1) **Wild Bill Hickok.** Here was an hombre who was everything they claim. Honest, modest, quiet—and deadly. The only way they could get him was in the back.
(2) **Abraham Lincoln.** At a meeting of his cabinet, Lincoln picked up a volume of his favorite humorist—Artemus Ward—and read from a hilarious story called "High Handed Outrage in Utica", over which he laughed heartily. But the cabinet members were not constructed of Lincoln's immortal grain. They had not the courage to laugh under such circumstances. So Lincoln laid down the book and read to them the document they'd come to hear—the Emancipation Proclamation.
(3) **Cole Younger.** His childhood actions were above reproach.
(4) **General Lew Wallace.** As governor of New Mexico, he wrote "Ben Hur", while being harrassed by the exploits of Billy the Kid.
(5) **Frank James.** He and his brother Jesse were hellions as kids.
(6) **Jesse James.** He was killed, of course, by Robert Ford. But the fact that Robert's brother Charles was also in the conspiracy and present at the death, has been somewhat overlooked.

Before he realized what was happening, a heavy arm had encircled his neck, and a knife curved toward his chest.

The SILVER BULLET

By Alexander Blade

What's a man to think when his wife walks out on him with another guy? So Clint Farr vowed vengeance—until he found out what really happened

FARR STRODE with cat-like silence along the board sidewalk, his eyes fixed upon the shadowy figure of a man moving some dozen yards ahead of him. The man did not seem to be aware as yet that he was being followed. That might have been due to the darkness and the bustle and murmur of human activity which the fall of evening had brought to the booming rail town of Bushnell.

In Farr's mind was a vivid picture of the man he was trailing. Dark, good-looking, a scar on his chin. Ab Gruder had described a man like that, long months since, when Farr had returned to the ranch back in Juniper and found that Grace was gone.

Farr did not know if it was the same man. He intended to find out. For that way he might locate Grace and bring his long search to an end.

Briefly, he thought of what the end of his quest would mean. Fury seared him, a molten stream of emotion that cascaded through his being—and left in its wake a lingering sadness.

It would not be easy to kill Grace.

Ahead of Farr, the dark, good-looking man with the scar on his chin turned a corner. Farr momentarily abandoned stealth, and lengthened his strides. Only when he, too, had reached the corner, did he slow his steps.

Scar-chin was a short distance away, still walking with apparent unconcern. More cautiously, Farr took up the chase.

This side street led into a dark, quiet part of Bushnell. A street of warehouses and freight yards. The racket from the honkytonks along the town's main street reached only faintly here. Moonlight made a silver half-dusk between the lane of shadowed buildings.

Farr did not realize that someone had fallen in behind him until he heard the scrape of a bootheel against hard-packed ground.

He whirled, all shouting nerves, his hand stabbing down to his holstered gun. And while still half-turned, a heavy body jarred against him, an arm circled his neck. He heard a grunt of sound, caught a reek of whiskey-laden breath. His sensations were suddenly crystal-clear, limned starkly as though in fire.

He saw the glint of the knife as it swept in a vicious curve toward his chest.

In the same instant, he felt himself falling. Deliberately, he allowed the impact of his attacker to carry him down. He twisted violently. The knife grazed the underside of his arm, tearing through the cloth of his coat and the shirt beneath.

Then, half atop his assailant, Farr hit the ground. His twisting had left his gun arm free. In a surge of movement, he completed his draw and jabbed the muzzle of the weapon

against the other's fleshy middle. He felt the knife hand stir again, felt the man jerk convulsively, in desperation.

He fired twice.

And in the flashing, poignant interval that followed the muffled blasts of his gun, he felt the body against him stiffen. He sensed the shock, the pain, the all-encompassing terror that came with the awareness of death. He felt the draining...the quiet.

Farr rolled clear. In a patch of shadow, he rose to one knee, squinting into the dusk ahead. Silence... stillness. He waited. And then a voice, speaking softly, cautious, worried.

"Bronc? Are you all right?"

Farr smiled slightly, a lean movement of his mouth, without meaning. Bright motes filled his eyes, like frost glittering on steel.

BRONC. THE man Farr had just shot. Scar-chin had known the man, had known he would be here, had known what he intended to do.

That meant Scar-chin had expected that Farr would follow him from the Cathay Saloon. He had posted Bronc here, had led Farr into the ambush.

Farr had happened to notice Scar-chin amid the boisterous crowd in the Cathay. He had stared at the man because of the scar and the dark good-looks. And he had been noticed as well. Somehow he had been recognized, or seen as a source of danger. Scar-chin had immediately prepared and baited a trap. Bronc must have been among the several men with whom Scar-chin had idly spoken before leaving the Cathay. Farr had paid little attention to that. He had been engrossed in thinking back over what Ab Gruder had told him.

Now he knew that Grace was near. Grace—and the end of the search.

He touched the silver bullet that hung from his watch chain. The frosty motes still shone in his eyes, but the twist of his lips held anguish.

In the shadows beyond, a gun roared. It spoke again, questing, with pauses between the shots, as Scar-chin probed the darkness around Farr.

Farr had flattened himself at the first shot. He waited, counting the blasts. Scar-chin was clever. He used four shots, leaving one or two in his gun.

Farr remained motionless. His silence might encourage Scar-chin into thinking that both he and Bronc had been killed. It might draw him into investigating.

But the next few minutes showed that Scar-chin was no fool. Listening, Farr heard the other's footsteps quickening into a run, beginning to fade with distance. He rose to his feet and hurried in pursuit. Then, bare seconds later, he stopped in disgust at the sound of hoofbeats starting up and dying away.

Part of Bronc's instructions, evidently, had been to obtain Scar-chin's horse and have it waiting here.

Farr thought leadenly of his own mount, tethered to the hitchrack in front of the Cathay. He moved his shoulders and walked back to where he had left Bronc. He dragged the man into a swath of moonlight, studying him. A heavy man, bearded, swarthy features above the beard. A hard, ruthless man, who had lived as he had died—violently.

The sound of voices and of running footsteps came from the direction of the main street. Farr's and Scar-chin's shots had evidently been heard, and a group of townfolk were now approaching to investigate.

Farr straightened from his bending

position over Bronc, rubbing the palms of his hands against the sides of his coat. He had become aware also of the scratch on the underside of his arm, which was beginning to smart.

He glanced briefly toward the corner, then sent his eyes along the buildings nearest him. The oncoming townfolk would soon reach him, and he had no desire to answer questions. He glided into motion toward a dark opening between two of the nearby structures, vanishing from sight bare seconds before a knot of men turned the corner and hurried down the side street.

IN HIS room at the Craymont Hotel, Farr found that the gash in his arm was serious enough to require some attention. He bathed it, then swabbed it with whisky and tied a light bandage in place.

Finally, he donned a clean shirt and an extra coat. He filled the bottom of a water tumbler with the whisky he had used on his arm and drank it slowly, his eyes narrowed and cold with thought.

His quest was near an end, but the events of the evening hinted of complications. He knew his advantage of surprise was gone. Scar-chin had been warned that Farr was on his trail. He would be alert, prepared for trouble.

That meant Grace would be warned as well. She had gone away with the scarred, good-looking man, and it was logical to assume that where one was, the other would be also. Yet, somehow, the idea didn't tally. Farr had asked questions about Grace in the various places about Bushnell where she would have been likely to appear. But no one had seen a woman of her description.

Grace was distinctive. She had a strong, lithe figure and a head of thick, dull-gold hair that contrasted startlingly with her dark eyes and brows. A vividly attractive, vital woman. A woman who would be noticed and remembered.

Scar-chin was in Bushnell—but Grace had not been seen. What made the matter all the more puzzling was the fact that Scar-chin must have been in town for some time, to judge from the acquaintances he had made.

Farr shook his head impatiently and set down the empty tumbler. He was certain of one thing—he would have to act quickly now. Scar-chin must be allowed no time to escape or put up a defense. Farr had to find where the man lived. The obvious place to start asking questions was the Cathay Saloon.

Checking over his gun, Farr picked up his hat and left the room. He was crossing the hotel lobby when he heard the night stage draw up outside the building, amid a clatter of hoofs, shouts, and creaking springs. He paused for a moment, a tall, somber figure in a dark coat and hat, listening. He was a still youthful man, despite the powdering of gray at his temples, despite the lines of weariness and disillusionment in his angular face.

One of his long, spare hands rose slowly to the watch chain across his vest, to touch and fondle the silver bullet fastened there with a bit of wire. It was a habitual gesture. He did not seem aware of making it.

Then he shrugged, a slight movement of his shoulders, and continued on his way out of the hotel. Reaching the wide porch that ran around two sides of the building, he came to an abrupt stop.

IN THE light pouring through the open hotel entrance, a small group of people were visible as they attended to the unloading of their baggage from the stage. One of the arrivals was a woman, lithe and shapely, with

thick, golden hair showing under her small hat. Her back was turned to Farr, but there was a haunting suggestion of familiarity about her figure, about her hair. A leaping wonder in his eyes, he drew back into the shadows further along the porch and watched.

Presently, a porter carrying two bags following behind her, the woman turned and mounted the hotel steps. Farr saw her face clearly before she reached the entrance. Fine-chiseled features, dark eyes and brows.

There was no doubt about her identity. It was Grace, looking tired and somehow uneasy.

Grace was here, in Bushnell. Grace...

Farr felt weak and shaken. It was a strange feeling. He should have known only a cruel delight in having discovered Grace after all the long, weary months of searching. But the sight of her brought back the memory of what she had once meant to him, a memory of such depth and significance that it threatened to overwhelm the bleak purpose that had driven him for so long.

Abruptly, he straightened, his face twisting into a harsh, bitter mask. He told himself he was a fool. Grace had betrayed him, made a mockery out of the very memories over which he had been sentimentalizing.

There could be no turning back. There could be only...vengeance.

With an outward casualness intended for the benefit of the several other persons present on the porch, Farr moved to one of the hotel windows, through which he could peer into the lobby.

Grace had stopped at the desk. She spoke briefly with the clerk, then bent to sign the register. She took the key that was handed to her and started toward the stairs, the porter once more following with her baggage.

Farr watched as she mounted out of sight. He remained where he was, waiting until the other arrivals had also gone to their rooms. Then, still pretending casualness, he returned to the lobby, strolling toward the desk.

He nodded to the clerk. "Evening, Fred. Mind letting me have a look at the register? I think I know one of the men who just came in."

"Sure, here." The man called Fred turned the heavy ledger around on the desk top and yawned and stretched.

Farr ran his eyes quickly over the names that had just been entered. He stifled the surprise that surged within him. She had given her correct name, Grace Farr. Her room number was 207.

GRACE FARR. It disturbed him that she should be still using his name. He himself had adopted a false identity as a precaution against warning Scar-chin and Grace of his presence when he caught up with them.

He became aware that Fred was watching him questioningly. With a rueful half-grin, he shook his head.

"Guess I was mistaken. Thanks, anyway."

Farr chatted idly with the clerk for a few minutes. Finally, announcing that he intended to turn in, he strolled toward the stairs.

He went quietly to room 207.

At the door he glided to a stop, listening. Grace seemed to be alone. Her footsteps were faintly audible behind the panel, mingling with the sound of bureau drawers being opened as she evidently unpacked her clothes.

With a glance along both ends of the hall, Farr knocked.

Behind the door was an instant silence. Then footsteps approaching,

slow, hesitant, as if weighted with fear.

"Who is it?"

"An old friend of yours, Mrs. Farr."

"I...I don't understand. What is your name?"

"I'm saving that for a little surprise."

Silence again. And then the clicking of the key in the lock. The door swung partially open, as though the woman were cautious and intended merely to glance at her visitor before extending a full welcome.

Farr did not wait for her inspection. He threw his shoulder roughly against the door and stalked into the room. Grace was momentarily thrown off balance. She stared at him in shock and incipient anger, then both faded before an incredulous surprise.

"Clint!" she said. "Clint!"

Farr said nothing. He watched her coldly as he swung the door shut behind him. He used his left hand. His right rested on the butt of his gun.

Grace did not seem to notice. She started toward him, her hands outstretched. Delight made her attractive face a picture of almost complete beauty. Tears brimmed her dark eyes.

"Don't touch me," Farr said. "Stay where you are."

She stopped as suddenly as though he had slapped her. She gazed at him, her features suddenly blank, her red lips parted slightly.

WITHOUT taking his eyes from her, Farr moved quickly across the room, toward the open door of a closet. He glanced into it briefly, then returned his full attention to the woman.

"What is it, Clint? Why are you acting like this? After all these months—"

"Don't talk like a fool," Farr said sharply. "It isn't going to do you any good to pretend you didn't run away with another man."

She studied him with apparent bewilderment. Then a slow smile lighted her dark eyes and curved the corners of her mouth. She spoke with a patient softness, as she might have spoken to a petulant child. "But, Clint, I didn't run away with another man."

"You seem to have gotten a lot of experience in plain and fancy lying, Grace. Maybe that's what comes of all the time you spent living with the polecat you went off with."

"Clint, it's true—every word of it. I didn't run away with anyone. I haven't been living with anyone since you left the ranch. You seem to be terribly mixed up."

Farr shook his head slowly, his features cold and graven. "I've had a long time to think about what you did, Grace. I'm dead sure I have it all figured out.

"Old Ab Gruder told me about the man who came to the ranch while I was gone with the herd of cattle I was taking to the railroad for shipment. A goodlooking jasper dark, a scar on his chin. I guess you knew him before you met me. When you stop to think of it, Grace, there's a lot you never told me about yourself.

"You must have been seeing this jasper with the scar behind my back, while I was out working around the ranch. You went out for a ride almost every afternoon, and you could have been meeting him someplace not too far away and not too close. You told him about me taking the cattle in for shipment. That's why he came straight to the ranch the way he did. He saw it was a chance for you and him to go away together and put a lot of distance behind yourselves.

"I guess you liked the idea, Grace. Old Ab Gruder told me how excited you seemed. You put him off by say-

ing something had happened and that you would be back soon. But you didn't come back. When I returned and heard what old Ab had to say, I knew right then what must have happened. But I waited, hoping I was wrong. I waited three, four days. And you didn't come back."

Grace said slowly, "Clint, I sent Jed Gurney—the man with the scar—back to the ranch to tell you what was keeping me. He should have told you; he said he did. Now I know he was lying."

Again Farr shook his head. "It's no good, Grace. I'm not so addle-brained over you anymore that I believe everything you tell me."

"Clint, please! Let me explain!"

He swept his hand in a curt gesture. "If there have to be words between us, I'm going to be the one to make them. I don't want to drag this out any longer than I have to. There's only one thing more I'm going to say, and I want you to listen.

"GRACE, after I got the money for the cattle, I bought you something. A silver bracelet. It was more than just a fancy trinket I thought you'd like. It stood for all you meant to me, all we had shared together. When you didn't come back, it became just a symbol of my own foolishness and your treachery.

"I still intend to give you that bracelet—but in a different way, the only way that could be after what you did. I melted it down and made a bullet out of it. I took a lead slug out of its shell and put the silver one in. A silver bullet for a double-crossing woman."

"Clint," she said softly. "Poor Clint." Pity and wonder seemed to struggle in her face.

He was pale. The lines around his mouth were like gouges carved in stone. "Where do you want me to give you your present, Grace? Here, or somewhere outside of town? It doesn't matter to me. I don't care if I get away with it or not. I died months ago."

The pity and the wonder were still in her face. She appeared about to speak, then hesitated, listening.

Footsteps were coming down the hall. They stopped at the door. In another moment, knuckles rapped briskly against wood.

Farr had his gun in his hand. He glanced swiftly about the room, noted the open closet. He stepped close to Grace and whispered softly, "Get rid of whoever it is. I'll be in the closet. Give me away, and you die immediately. Remember that."

The knuckles rapped again. Farr glided noiselessly into the closet, swinging the door after him but leaving it slightly open. Through this opening, he settled himself to watch and listen.

Grace had gone to the hotel room door. She placed her lips close to the panel and spoke questioningly.

"Who is it?"

"The sheriff, ma'am," a muffled voice answered. I'd like to have a word with you."

Grace hesitated, glancing toward the closet. Then she moved her shoulders helplessly and opened the door.

Two men stood in the hall, one stocky and grizzled, the other younger, lean-bodied. With a nod, the grizzled man stepped forward, pulling back the lapel of his coat to reveal a brief glimpse of a badge.

"I'm the sheriff, Mrs. Farr. This" —he indicated his companion— "is my deputy. I'm sorry to trouble you, seeing as how you've just got into town, but I'll have to ask you to step over to the jail with me."

"The jail," Grace said. Her hand rose slowly to her throat. "Why...

I'm afraid I don't understand. What is this all about?"

"We have a prisoner at the jail, you see. We sort of want you to identify him. It's just a formality, because he's been asking for you and told us you were in town."

GRACE WAS silent for a long moment, staring at the grizzled man. Then she said, "It...it's the Goldtop Kid, isn't it?"

The sheriff nodded gravely. "He wants to see you, Mrs. Farr."

"All right." She turned slowly to the bed, upon which she had placed her hat and coat. She gathered them up, sending a glance of mute appeal toward Farr's hiding place.

He remained motionless and silent, an amazed perplexity twisting his face. He had heard of the Goldtop Kid. The man was a clever and much-wanted outlaw. It seemed incredible that Grace should know him, that he should be asking for her. What could possibly be the connection between them?

His mind flashed over the brief span of his married life with Grace, and he realized how little he knew about her background. She had never said much about herself, and he had not considered it his duty to pry. It seemed now that there were things Grace had wanted to hide, things like the Goldtop Kid—and the scar-chinned man she had called Jed Gurney.

Recovering from his surprise, Farr returned his attention to the figures in the room beyond. For the first time he became clearly aware that Grace was about to leave—that she was, in fact, even now moving toward the door. Sharp protest rose in him. He couldn't permit her to go. She had been warned of his intentions. She might flee the town, or obtain help against him.

He had the impulse to leap from the closet, to shoot Grace down before she could escape his vengeance. He knew he would have to face the two lawmen then, of course. One or both were certain to get him. But he had lived only for this moment. What happened to him afterward was not important—perhaps for the reason that life without Grace was not important.

Yet, he hesitated. He remembered Grace's reaction to seeing him. She had shown no hint of fear or guilt. He remembered, too, his discovery that there were details about her background of which he had not known. It was thus altogether possible that her connection with Jed Gurney was not as obvious and simple as he had imagined it to be. He couldn't take two lives recklessly until he knew just how matters stood.

Grace went through the door The sheriff and his deputy followed her, the latter closing the door as he left.

Farr leaned against the wall of the closet and expelled his breath slowly. He felt an odd relief. It was the sort of relief one might feel after having found an excuse to postpone a highly unpleasant task.

THEN HE grew tense once more. Grace was now beyond the reach of his gun. She might tell the two lawmen of his presence here, of what he had planned to do. They might come back after him.

If they did, he would know the truth about Grace.

He waited, his gun ready in his hand.

Long, slow minutes passed. The door did not open.

At last, Farr left the closet. He stood in the middle of the room, thoughtfully surveying the interrupted preparations Grace had made for unpacking.

A frown deepened the creases in his forehead. It seemed that he had been wrong about Grace. It seemed that he had misjudged her completely. If she were as heartless and unfaithful as he had thought, she would have turned the two lawmen against him in an effort to escape punishment. But she hadn't done that.

Had it been merely because of the Goldtop Kid, waiting for her, a prisoner, at the jail?

Farr didn't know. He was certain only that a mystery of some kind surrounded Grace, a mystery in which Jed Gurney and the Goldtop Kid were somehow involved.

His eyes fell on Grace's luggage, open on the bed. An idea turned his expression to one of sudden purpose. By looking through Grace's belongings, he might find something—letters, perhaps—that would clear up the mystery surrounding her, or at least suggest a solution.

He went through the first of the two bags, but did not find what he was seeking. He started on the other, probing among feminine underthings and toilet articles.

From behind him came a sibilant whisper of sound, followed by a faint creaking.

He whirled, his senses flaring in alarm. He realized that the hotel room door had opened. He remembered that it had been closed, but not locked. He denounced himself as a fool for having overlooked that. And even as the thoughts flashed through his mind, his hand was stabbing down to his holstered gun.

"Leave it, friend!"

A man stood in the doorway. A youthful man, tall and husky, with golden hair showing under the brim of his tilted black hat. His features were watchful and cold—and somehow familiar. Farr was certain he had not seen the man before, yet he felt he knew someone who closely resembled him. That person, oddly enough, was Grace.

The newcomer held a gun, its muzzle pointed with menacing steadiness at Farr's middle. Farr glanced briefly at the gun, holding the motionless pose with which the other's sharp command had frozen him.

NOW THE man stepped into the room, swinging the door closed after him. He moved with a noticeable limp. His dark, intent eyes never left Farr for an instant.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same questions," Farr said.

The other smiled thinly. "I'm holding the gun, friend. It would be a good idea to tell me why I shouldn't start using it."

Farr shrugged. "My name is Farr. This happens to be my wife's room. I came up to see her."

"Farr? Clint Farr?" the other asked in quick surprise. He grinned and holstered his gun. "You look like the kind of hombre Grace would get hitched to. She always had most of the good sense there was in the family. I'm Hyatt Macklin, Grace's brother."

Startled, Farr shook the hand being offered to him. Grace's maiden name had been Macklin, and he recalled that she had once mentioned having a brother. Hyatt Macklin's resemblance to her was now explained.

"Sorry I had a gun on you," Macklin said. "Grace told me all about you, but I never saw you in the flesh until right now. Besides, I thought Grace would be alone."

He limped over to the bed and sat down. He lowered his body slowly, being careful with his lame leg. Finally, he gestured at the room, glancing quizzically back at Farr.

"Where is Grace, by the way?"

Farr hesitated. "She went to the jail," he said slowly.

"She went...where?" Macklin was staring, his palms suddenly flat and tense on the bed.

"The sheriff and his deputy came here after her," Farr went on. "They said a prisoner at the jail wanted to see her. Somebody whose name seems to be the Goldtop Kid."

His expression suddenly one of sharp dismay, Macklin pushed himself up from the bed. "This sheriff and deputy, what did they look like?"

Farr described the pair as closely as he could. "What is it?" he finished. "Is there something wrong?"

Macklin nodded with a kind of bitter weariness. "Plenty. The two men you told me about are no sheriff and deputy. They're a couple of Jed Gurney's gunhands. The whole thing was a trick to get hold of Grace. You see, the Goldtop Kid isn't in jail. I happen to know—because I'm the Goldtop Kid."

"You!" Farr said. He looked at the mop of golden hair showing under Macklin's hat, and understanding came into his face.

"I guess Grace never told you about that," Macklin went on. "I don't blame her. It isn't the kind of thing a sister could be proud of."

FARR SHOOK his head with a slow, dazed motion. "I don't figure all this. I had the idea Gurney was a friend of Grace's. She left Juniper with him, several months back I thought...well, no matter what I thought. But now you say Gurney pulled a trick to get hold of Grace. Why would he do that? What's going on?"

Macklin said in surprise, "Didn't Grace tell you that either?"

"No. I haven't seen her since she left Juniper with Gurney. I was away on business when she left. When I got back, all I ever knew about what had happened to her was that she had gone off with some good-looking jasper who had a scar on his chin. She didn't leave a note."

Macklin was staring. Farr glanced at him and resumed, "A while back, I ran into Grace in front of the hotel. She had just gotten into town, and I followed her up to this room. She told me the name of the jasper with the scar on his chin—Jed Gurney. I didn't find out anything else. The two men claiming to be a sheriff and deputy showed up, and Grace went with them. I was in the closet, and I kept quiet. I didn't know what it was all about. I guess I was too plumb surprised to do any thinking."

Macklin slapped the back of one hand into the palm of the other, shaking his head in dismay. "What a mess! And it's all my fault. Of course Grace didn't leave a note. She expected to get back to the ranch before you did. If I'd had any sense—"

Macklin broke off, his eyes sharpening on Farr. "There isn't much time. We've got to get Grace away from Gurney. But before we do anything, I reckon I ought to tell you how everything happened."

He lowered himself back to the bed and began speaking swiftly: "Jed Gurney was one of the wild bunch I rode with. He went after Grace because I sent him. We'd pulled a bank holdup in a town near Juniper. I'd caught a load of buckshot in one leg, and because of that had holed up in a shack in the hills. I couldn't get to a doctor, but I remembered Grace was living not far away. She knew nursing, and I needed her help. Or maybe I had the idea it would be the last time I'd see her. I don't know. I guess I was out of my head in a way. I didn't even think I'd be messing things up between you and Grace.

"I told Gurney not to say much, just that I wanted to see Grace. I didn't want any lawmen to get wind of it. Grace didn't know the condition I was in, and she thought she'd get back to the ranch right away. When she found out she'd have to stay and take care of me for a couple of weeks, she sent Gurney back to the ranch to explain that I had been hurt and that she was going to look after me for a while. From what you said, though, it looks like Gurney didn't do that. He'd been going against me in a lot of ways, and since I was flat on my back, he must have seen a chance to take over. That would explain what happened later on."

MACKLIN had been rolling a cigarette as he spoke. Now he lighted it and went on, "You see, what Gurney mainly wanted—and what he still wants—is the money that the bunch of us have cached away. We had kind of a system. Every time we pulled a holdup, we'd keep just the money we needed for expenses, leaving the rest with a friend who kept it for us. This man was a member of the gang, but he kept under cover. None of us knew what he did with the money, and we didn't worry about it. He'd helped us in a lot of ways, and we trusted him.

"The idea behind the whole thing was that, by having this friend take care of the money for us, we'd keep down the chances of being rounded up. All kinds of lawmen and badge-toters were hunting for us. If we spent too much, or got drunk and let something slip, they'd be on our trail, pronto. Besides, having our shares saved up for us meant we could go south of the Border when things got too hot and live in style.

"Gurney and a couple other men didn't cotton to the idea of the money being handled that way, but they were out-voted and had to play along. As soon as I was flat on my back, though, they made up their minds to pull a double-cross and get hold of all the money that was cached away. Gurney was supposed to ride back to Juniper and tell you what was keeping Grace. But instead of doing that, he and his skunk sidekicks rode out to the man who was keeping the money and tried to get him to tell where it was hidden. The methods they used would have made an Apache sick. The man died—but he didn't talk."

Macklin took a long draw at his cigarette, and his dark eyes sharpened on Farr. "That wasn't the end of the money, though. There was a plan ready in case anything happened to the man, and that way I found out where the money was. I've fixed it up so that the men who stuck with me will get their shares. Gurney doesn't know it yet, but he knows I know where the money is. He's rounded himself up a gang and has been hunting me to get hold of the information.

"I was afraid he'd think of using Grace as a way to put a rope on me and make me talk. He knew she was living in Juniper, and it wouldn't have been much trouble for him to get her away. So I wrote to Grace. I told her she might be in danger where she was, and I asked her to meet me here, in Bushnell. I wanted to keep her away from the ranch for a while, and I guess I made the move just in time. Gurney did go after her. And somehow he trailed her here. He had a couple of his gunhands pose as lawmen and claim I was a prisoner at the jail so he could get her out of the hotel without a fuss."

FARR WAS staring numbly at the floor. He told himself that he had been a fool, an out-and-out fool. He

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had been wrong about Grace. He had completely misinterpreted her connection with Gurney. He thought of the silver bullet he had made and with which he had intended to punish Grace for her seeming unfaithfulness, and he felt a pang of sudden shame.

Macklin said heavily, "Gurney's a snake—mean clear through. I hate to think of what he'll do to Grace when he finds out he doesn't have a chance of getting the money anymore."

Farr straightened, abrupt concern knifing through him. "Do you know where he might have taken her?"

Macklin shook his head, his expression bleakly speculative. "No—but I think I know how we can find out. That's by getting our hands on one of Gurney's men and making him talk. It'll be easy enough because most likely Gurney has a couple of his gunhands watching the hotel, figuring I'll show up to see Grace. I guessed he would do that if he was in Bushnell, and so I came around the back."

"If Gurney has men watching the hotel, we'll find them," Farr said grimly. "And they'll talk. Let's go."

Macklin met Farr's eyes for a moment, and his own kindled with a sudden friendly warmth. He nodded and went to the door, peering out cautiously as he opened it. Then he gestured and led the way along one end of the hall, walking quietly and swiftly despite his limp.

A turn in the hall brought them to an open window. Macklin indicated this with the explanation that it was the route by which he had entered the hotel. The roof of a service porch was situated a few feet below the sill, and from there it was a simple matter to slide down a support to the ground.

They stood for a few seconds in the yard behind the hotel, listening to see if their exit had been noticed. Lights glowed behind a couple of nearby windows on the ground floor of the building, marking the location of what was evidently the kitchen. A short distance away, a lantern burned in front of a stable. There was no motion anywhere, no unusual sounds.

Touching Farr's arm, Macklin moved across the yard and into an alley beyond. He spoke softly as he went. It appeared that he had a companion waiting for him, with horses, in the alley. It was this man who had gone into the hotel to see if Grace had registered, and who had obtained for Macklin the number of her room.

Several yards down the shadowed lane of the alley, Farr at last was able to discern the lighter outlines of two horses. Macklin hurried forward.

"Mike!" he whispered. "Where are you?" And then he stopped. His breath made a harsh, sibilant sound.

A dark shape lay sprawled near the horses. The shape of a man.

MACKLIN bent over the figure, fumbling in a pocket and then striking a match. Watching, Farr saw a portion of checked shirtfront appear in the small, flickering circle of light. A dark stain that gleamed wetly spread over it. The light touched the figure's face briefly, and then went out.

Macklin slowly straightened "Mike's dead. Looks like he was knifed."

Farr began, "That means somebody may still be—"

"Reach, you two!" a voice cut in, sharp and urgent with menace. "Reach, or you're finished!"

There was an instant of utter stillness, utter silence. Farr felt a chill dismay, which was thrust aside and forgotten as Macklin's hand closed frantically on his arm and

shoved him hard toward the horses.

The deathly quiet was torn by violent talons of sound.

A gun roared from the shadows scant yards away. It was answered almost at once from the spot where Macklin had remained. Other guns opened up from a position near the first, their blasts blending in a staccato thunder, their flashes stabbing spitefully through the dusk. Over a span of instants that seemed longer than they actually were, the noise was furious and sustained.

Farr had reached the horses. He realized that Macklin had wanted him to flee, that Macklin himself had intended to remain and hold off pursuit, not hesitating to sacrifice his own life in the attempt. But Farr saw no reason to run. These were undoubtedly Gurney's men. Any one of them would possess the information that Farr and Macklin had started out to find.

Swiftly, watching the flashes of the guns, Farr gauged the positions of the attackers. In a detached corner of his mind, he realized that Gurney had been crafty enough to have his men watch both sides of the hotel. Gurney must have known that Macklin would not be likely to enter through the front.

Even as Farr readied himself, the battle thundered to a climax. The mingled crashing of guns suddenly became sporadic and died.

Between these final blasts and following them, came chillingly significant sounds. Something heavy fell to the earth with an inert, fleshy thud. Something that could have been only a man. Moments later, another thud followed it. From a different spot came a long drawn-out sigh, tired and bitter and without hope. A boot rasped hard against gravel, and a dimly seen figure rolled over once and became still.

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SILENCE closed down. Farr gripped his gun and breathed softly, waiting. He didn't know exactly what he was waiting for, but he waited.

At last, he heard faint footfalls, questing. He squinted into the gloom, rigid with the intensity of his effort. The footfalls stopped, then resumed. The figure of a man, lighter than the background of darkness, moved into Farr's range of vision.

Instants longer he watched, making certain that the skulker was not Macklin. Then, very quickly, he moved.

He swung from behind the sheltering bulk of the horses, his gun leveled. "Put up your hands!"

His answer was a gush of flame, a blast of sound. It was an answer he had expected. He kept moving. A lethal breath touched his cheek briefly, going almost unnoticed as he triggered his own weapon and felt it roar and jerk in his hand.

Violent motion, violent noise—and then a sudden, stricken quiet. It was broken by a low groan. A falling gun made a dull impact as it hit the ground, wraith-like in the gloom, Farr's opponent stood swaying, clutching with both hands at his chest.

And now, from various points in the distance, other sounds became audible. Voices called in excitement. Running footsteps approached, faint but quickly coming nearer. The gunfight was drawing the usual gathering of curious townfolk.

Swiftly, Farr crossed over to the man he had shot, catching him as he slumped in growing weakness. Farr was relieved that he had succeeded in his effort to keep from killing the other. There were certain questions he wanted to ask. And he had to learn the answers speedily, before the approaching townfolk reached the scene.

He spoke, his voice hurried and grimly earnest: "I gave you a chance, friend. I could have killed you outright, but I didn't. Now, you tell me where Gurney's holed up, and I'll kind of see to it that your luck doesn't run out."

"You...you go to hell!" the man said.

"Don't be a fool," Farr said urgently. "You aren't finished yet. A doctor will be able to patch you up. If you hold out on me..."

Farr brought up the muzzle of his gun, pressed it savagely against the other's temple. "Talk—or you're through!"

Life is usually precious to those who are on the verge of leaving it. The man talked, haltingly, his words broken by twinges of pain.

Gurney, he revealed, was hiding out in a deserted shack in the hills to the north of Bushnell. He described the route for reaching it, as well as certain landmarks in the immediate vicinity.

Farr made certain that Grace was a prisoner at the shack. Gurney had intended using her as a hostage to force Macklin into revealing the hiding place of the robbery loot, as Macklin himself had guessed.

The wounded man was sagging now, his strength spent. Farr lowered him to the ground, then listened to the approachng footsteps. He had very little time left.

Hurriedly, he sought the spot where Macklin had fallen. He struck a couple of matches and examined the other briefly. It was as he had feared: Macklin was dead.

Only then did Farr turn to where the two horses stood. He untied both, mounting one and sending the other away with a sharp slap on the flank. A knot of men burst into the alley behind him. Voices yelled. Bending low in the saddle, Farr sent his mount leaping forward. A short time later,

Bushnell was a cluster of lights in his rear, and he was traveling at a steady lope toward the dark outline of hills to the north.

THE LANDMARKS with which Farr had been provided, made his search an easy one. He found the shack perched halfway up a long slope, partly screened by trees and brush. The windows had been rather carelessly blacked out with heavy material of some sort. Enough light came through them, and through numerous chinks in the the walls, so that anyone with an idea of where the shack was located could find it without much difficulty.

Farr dismounted while still some distance away and approached on foot, slipping his gun into his hand. He moved slowly, careful to make no betraying noise. He reached the shack from one side, creeping up to the wall and peering within through a gap in the boards.

Almost the first person he saw was Grace, bound into a chair on the opposite side of the room. She sat with bent head, a picture of dejection. Her golden hair was disheveled, her dress torn.

Seated at a table near the middle of the floor, his features clearly lighted by the kerosene lamp placed nearby, was a man Farr had seen earlier that night. He was the pretended deputy who had appeared at Grace's hotel room. He was dealing himself a solitaire hand, his head cocked to one side to avoid the smoke from the drooping cigarette between his lips. No other persons seemed to be present.

Farr glanced at Grace again, muscles tightening around his mouth. Then he turned away, searching the ground near him until he found two fairly large stones. One after the other, he tossed them down the slope. They made a startlingly loud racket.

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The light in the shack went out. Soft, quick footfalls sounded as the man within evidently crossed to a window and peered out. A few seconds later, the footfalls became audible again. Door hinges creaked. Bootheels crunched against gravel.

Farr was standing at the corner of the shack. He saw the dim figure of the man appear in the surrounding darkness, a rifle glinting in his hands.

"Here!" he said.

THE FIGURE whirled with explosive swiftness. Flame and thunder blasted the gloom. Bits of wood showered the side of Farr's face, and in the next instant, the gun in his hand was roaring an answer.

He fired twice. The rifle did not blast again. The only noise it made was as it dropped to the rocky ground.

A strangely hunched form staggered against the front of the cabin, leaned tiredly against it for a moment, then slid heavily to the earth. It did not move again.

Farr remained where he was, listening. The night silence, which had closed down once more, continued unbroken. Eagerly, then, he entered the cabin, striking a match and relighting the lamp.

Grace sat with tense erectness in the chair, her dark eyes wide and her face pale. She stared incredulously at Farr.

"Clint! Oh, Clint! I never expected to see you again."

Delight seemed to struggle for dominance in her face. It gave way before a surge of bitterness. "I suppose you came here just to kill me."

Farr went to her, shaking his head gravely. "No, Grace. That's over with. I've been a locoed, no-account fool. If I came here for anything, it's to ask you to forgive me. You see, I've found out all about Gurney...and the Goldtop Kid."

She was tense again, searching his face. "Clint, what do you mean? What has happened?"

He explained as he began untying her bonds, speaking swiftly. He related the sequence of events which had begun with the appearance of Hyatt Macklin at the hotel and ended with his death at the hands of Gurney's henchmen in the alley.

Freed of her bonds, Grace had risen to stand close against him, held within the circle of his arms. She shuddered at the conclusion of Farr's story, pressing her face against his shoulder.

"Poor Hy," she said. "I was afraid it would happen. Jed Gurney told me that I was going to be used to make Hy tell him something he wanted to know...something about a cache of money."

"You saw Gurney?" Farr asked.

She nodded. "He rode up outside of town to meet the two men who came to the hotel after me. I knew I had been tricked as soon as the two started taking me away from town instead of to the jail. But they turned their guns on me and made me stay with them until Jed Gurney came.

"GURNEY laughed at me and explained why he had laid the trap. Then he had one of the men bring me here, and he went back to town with the other one. He expected Hy to show up at the hotel. He had men watching, and he wanted to be on hand. But, Clint, Gurney's dead, isn't he? Wasn't he one of the men who died in the gunfight in the alley?"

"I don't know," Farr said. "A crowd was coming, and I didn't have time to check up on all the men who fell." His expression became bleak and determined. "If Gurney isn't dead, I'm

going to get him if it's the last thing I do. He has it coming to him for what he did to your brother and what he tried to do to you—and me—earlier this evening. There's a couple of other reasons your brother told me about, too."

Farr removed the silver bullet from his watch chain, holding it somberly in his fingers. "I was wrong and crazy enough to think of killing you with this, Grace. I know better now. But there's still a use for the slug—to kill Gurney. It all started with him, and it's going to end with him."

He slid his gun into his hand, removing one of the shells and inserting the silver bullet in its place. He turned the cylinder so that this bullet would be the first to come under the hammer.

Grace watched with unhappy eyes. Abruptly, she caught at his arm. "Clint, do you really have to do this? Do you have to take the risk of getting shot? We've been separated for so long. If something should happen to you now—"

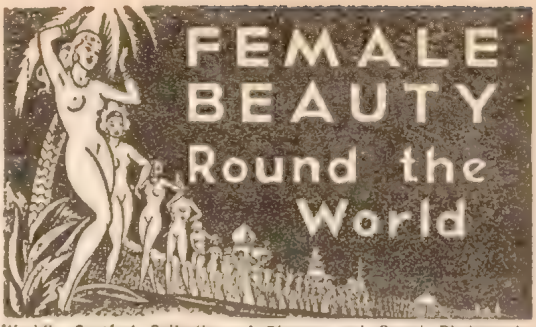
"Now or later, it's a chance I have to take," Farr broke in. "Gurney wants to know about that money cache. Your brother's dead, but Gurney might think you got hold of the information some way. If we gave him the slip here, he'd just trail us back to Juniper and try another one of his tricks."

He moved his hand in a gesture of finality. "Right now, we're got to get moving. We've already wasted too much time. There should be a horse for you outside somewhere. I'll get it and—"

The door of the shack swung violently open. The figure of Jed Gurney was revealed, a shotgun held in his hands.

"You two are going to stay right where you are!" he said.

Slowly, Gurney came into the room,



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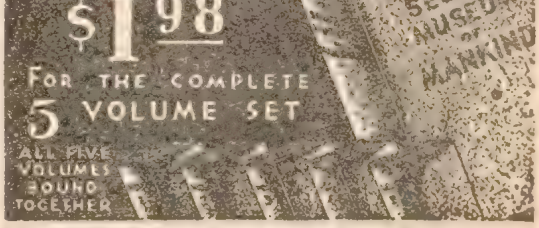

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his black eyes shining and watchful. He glanced briefly at Grace, indicating Farr with a jerk of his head.

"Get his gun. Drop it on the floor and kick it over to me. And be mighty careful how you do it. I'm not taking any chances."

Grace hesitated, staring at Farr, still held in the grip of stunned dismay. Farr felt only a chill heaviness, a weight of despair that pressed down on his mind and body. He had not expected Gurney to appear so quickly. Any move now, in the face of the shotgun, would be certain suicide.

"You heard what I said," Gurney told Grace. "Move!"

TRANCE-LIKE, Grace moved. She lifted Farr's weapon from its holster and dropped it to the floor. Her toe shoved it over to where Gurney stood.

"That's better," he said. "Now get over against the wall, there, both of you." He watched as his command was obeyed, then bent to pick up Farr's gun. He smiled thinly at Farr. "I was listening outside. You were making some strong talk about killing me with that silver bullet of yours. I don't know what the idea of that is, but I do know you aren't going to get your chance. In fact, I'd say it looks mighty like you're going to get the silver bullet used on you."

"No!" Grace cried in protest. "Please—no. He hasn't done you any harm."

"He killed a couple of my men," Gurney said. "Just a few minutes ago I heard him say he was going to finish me, too." Returning his attention to Farr, Gurney went on, "I thought you were a lawman at first, when you looked at me in the Cathay and followed me outside. I didn't know you were married to Macklin's sister. I got onto you after the gunfight in the alley behind the hotel. I was in the crowd that came running to see what had happened. Macklin and his pard were beefed, and the boys I had staked out there, the last one dying before a doc could get to him; but I saw somebody get away on a horse. Since everybody else was accounted for, the only other party who could have had a hand in the play was you. I figured you might have got a line on the shack, here, and I forked a horse, pronto."

Gurney's dark features hardened. "From what I heard a while ago, it looks like you know all about the money cache. I wanted the information out of Macklin, and my boys had orders to take him alive. If you hadn't been with him, they would have done it. But I figure it's no loss. I think one of you, or both of you, knows where the cache is."

Farr said, "You're wrong there. Grace never saw her brother all the time she's been in Bushnell. He wrote and told her to come here, but he didn't say exactly why, and he didn't give her any other information."

GRACE MOVED her golden head in an earnest nod. "I never knew about the cache. Hy never told me about his affairs, and I never asked him. I didn't want to know."

"Macklin mentioned the cache to me," Farr went on, "but he didn't tell me where it was. He didn't have to tell anybody outside of his crowd. He wasn't worried about the cache getting lost if anything happened to him because he had already taken care of that."

"What do you mean?" Gurney demanded.

"Macklin told me he had fixed it up so that the men who had stuck with him would get their shares out of the cache," Farr said. "He didn't say how, but he acted as if the whole thing was finished."

Gurney studied Farr for a moment,

frowning and pulling his lower lip between his teeth. He shook his head with grim emphasis. "You're lying—I'm dead certain of it. Why should Macklin have told his boys where the cache was? He had a chance to keep everything for himself. From what I've seen, it looks to me like he was holding on to the information as long as he could. And then, when he had to pass it on, the only person he'd have given it to was his sister. That's why he had her come to Bushnell."

"But Grace didn't see Macklin," Farr insisted. "She never got a chance to talk to him."

Gurney shook his head again, his features stubborn. "That doesn't mean she didn't already know about the cache before she reached town. Macklin must have told her in his letter. Maybe he was planning for her to pick the money up and move it somewhere else. I figure the lady has been holding out on you. Most likely, she wants the cache all for herself, too."

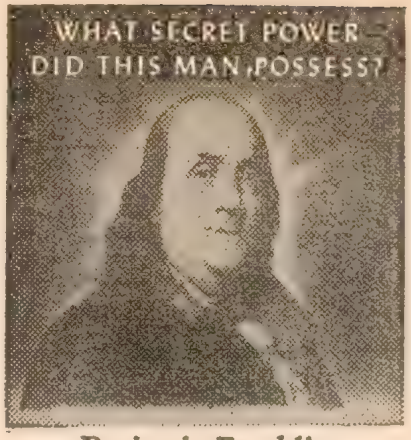
He swung the muzzle of the shotgun toward Grace. "I hit the nail there, didn't I? Go on—admit I'm right."

"I don't know anything about the cache," she said wearily. "Even if I did know, I wouldn't want the money. There's blood on every dollar of it."

Gurney's mouth twisted in sudden anger "You're lying!" he yelled savagely. "I know you're lying. I want to know where that cache is, and, by God, I'm going to find out. I'm through wasting time on palaver."

He centered the shotgun on Farr's middle, his black eyes swiveling to Grace. "I'm going to count to five. If you don't make up your mind to tell me what I want to know before I finish counting, I'm going to blow his guts apart."

"But I have nothing to tell you!" Grace cried. "It's true—every word of it! You must believe me!"



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"One!" Gurney said. He paused, his glance darting from Grace to Farr. "Two!" Another pause.

FARR'S CHEST was filled with a heavy, funereal drumming. The palms of his hands were wet as they pressed against the rough wall behind him. Muscles hard with tension, he prepared to throw himself at Gurney. He knew that the man was alert and ready, that the shotgun's blast was certain to fell him. But to remain motionless meant death as well. Grace had no information to give.

"Three!" Gurney said.

Farr bent his knees slowly, ever so slowly, gathering himself for a leap. The lamp-lit interior of the shack seemed unreal and far away.

"Four!" Gurney said.

Farr was prepared now. Each time Gurney's eyes had turned to Grace, he had bent his knees a little more. He pressed firmly against the wall with his hands in readiness for a violent shove.

"I'll tell!" Grace said abruptly. "I'll tell you where the cache is!"

Farr remained rigid, numbed with shock. Grace's eyes touched his for an instant, and suddenly he knew that she was only making a desperate bid for time.

Gurney, however, did not realize that—as yet. He smiled slowly, relaxing. His smile continued to grow. It became an evil, jeering thing.

Holding the shotgun under one arm, finger on the trigger, he reached with his free hand for Farr's gun, which he had thrust into the belt at his waist. He pointed the weapon at Farr, his eyes flicking once more to Grace.

"You made a bad mistake if you thought I was going to let this coyote live," he told her. "I have a score to settle with him. And besides, I just plain want him out of my way. Since you can tell me what I want to know, it's going to be between you and me, personal."

Grace stood frozen, the back of her hand against her mouth. Farr tensed himself for a leap again—then saw that he was too late.

"Here's your silver bullet!" Gurney snapped at Farr. He pressed the trigger of the gun.

The hammer clicked.

Nothing else happened. There was no explosion.

IT RATTLED Gurney, confused him. He must have decided that there was something wrong with the gun. Instead of pressing the trigger again, he hurled the weapon from him and snatched at the shotgun. In his haste, he jarred the barrel momentarily out of line.

Farr leaped. His hands closed on the shotgun, twisted fiercely.

Gurney's finger was tightening on the trigger as the muzzle swung toward his face. He was unable to check himself in time. The weapon roared.

A suddenly featureless horror, Gurney staggered back, twisted, and fell to the floor.

Slowly, then, Farr went to where his gun had fallen. He removed the silver bullet from the cylinder, staring down at it.

Grace came to where he stood. "What was the matter, Clint?"

"Guess I didn't clamp the case around the slug tight enough," he said abstractedly. "Air got in and spoiled the powder." His eyes sharpened on her in awed surprise. "Why, Grace, I wouldn't have been able to kill you if I had tried! That shows how wrong I was."

"How wrong we both were," she said, her tone gentle. "If I hadn't tried to keep you from knowing certain things, Clint—things about my brother—all this wouldn't have happened."

"The whole mess is over with," he

said. "And we'll start out fresh. It's not too late to start over again and to make up for this."

"No," she said. "It's not too late." She smiled tiredly and closed her eyes, pressing her face against his chest.

THE END

MAVERICK LEGEND

★ G. Watt ★

WHY IS an unbranded calf called a maverick? Over and over around Western campfires the story was told, until it became a folk-tale with a dozen variations. The cowboy taking his turn at story telling knew there was interest behind the word, and if he was not quite sure of his facts, he filled in as best he could. And so the legend developed, and grew and changed, and the word became firmly entrenched in Western vocabulary.

The fascination lay in the fact that the story was about a Texan, a cattleman of the old days. Most of the terms of the range came from the Mexican cowboys, the *vaqueros*. But this one expression was as new as the country, originating directly from one of their very own Texans. Some version of the legend was sure to be related wherever cattlemen were gathered to relax in a story-telling session.

The word came from the name of a man, on that the tales agreed, but was it Mauvrick, the Frenchman, or one of the Boston Mavericks? Or Mavrick, as Texans pronounce the word? Was it Samuel Maverick, originally of South Carolina, or M. A. Maverick, native of San Antonio?

Some of the stories say that the gentleman in question thought branding cruel, and let his stock run unbranded, believing that other ranchmen would know which were Maverick's cattle, since they were the ones without a brand. Most of the other ranchmen, however, proceeded to slap their own brand on any stock they found unbranded, and the kindhearted Mr. Maverick soon found himself a cattleman without cattle.

A different character entirely is given to Mr. Maverick in the stories that have him coming into the range country with no possessions to speak of except a branding iron. The man may have been poor, but he was also enterprising; and he rode the range early and late hunting for unbranded strays and waifs, which he proceeded to mark with his own brand, and claim as his property. Before long, says this version

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of the legend, Maverick was one of the cattle kings, while at the same time the word "maverick" began to be used for unbranded stock, since the other ranchmen realized what was going on, even though they did not do very much about it.

Another version has Mr. Maverick entrusting a herd to an employee, who was too lazy to bother with the round-up and branding iron. The cattle became scattered over a vast area, and other cowboys began putting their own brands on the stock. They knew the calf might be one of Maverick's, a "maverick", but since they could not be sure, they settled the question of who owned the animal by putting their own brand on it.

Then again, says another story, it might have been this way: Maverick, along with many other Texans, was absent from his home range for several years helping to fight the Civil War. The herds were left untended and ran wild on the range, increasing by the thousands. After the war, this particular Maverick made himself famous by being the quickest and most energetic of the ex-soldiers in claiming all the unbranded stock he could find.

Another variation has Maverick a trail driver, who had the misfortune to have a large herd stampede in a snowstorm one day. They were in mountainous country, and the cattle became so scattered that it was impossible for them to be gathered together again. The offspring of these cattle were called Maverick's cattle, even though there was no chance that Maverick would ever claim them.

As a matter of fact, the practice of claiming and branding the unbranded strays was common custom on the range for a long time. The range was open, so that the cattle wandered around freely and unchecked, no matter who owned them. Markets were hard to find, and cattle were very cheap. It was entirely impractical for an owner to attempt to keep track of every calf born and see that it was properly branded.

Especially in the period after the Civil War, there was an unbelievable number of cattle on the Texas ranges, and most of those born during the four years of the war were unbranded. New mavericks appeared almost as fast as others were caught and branded. There was no way of knowing to whom they belonged.

Regardless of who was originally responsible for this new word, it was a term that was necessary to fit the particular circumstances of the times. The word suited the requirements of the need for it, and this fact, together with the interest aroused in the beginnings of its use in this sense, made it an established part of our language. The word and its derivatives have come to have various meanings. While for a long time the practice of claiming an unbranded animal was the custom of the times, the word "mavericking" came to be another term for stealing after ranching became more controlled, and every calf had value to its owner. A brand that was unrecorded was a "maverick brand". "Mavericks" developed various tricks to lure unbranded calves away from their mothers so that they could be caught. The word has also been applied to people, a "maverick" person being a stray, one who has wandered away from the common herd of human beings.

One More River

★ By MILDRED MURDOCK ★

EXCEPT FOR the dreaded stampede, water caused most of the troubles experienced on the trail drives north. Either the lack of it, when animals and men nearly went mad with thirst; or more frequently, too much of it, as when flooded rivers had to be crossed.

The length of a day's drive was usually planned so that if at all possible, the night camp was made near some river or stream. When the drive led through arid country, or when an unusually rainless season had dried up the smaller streams, the cattle showed the effects of their need of water by becoming restless and bad-tempered. Thirsty cattle can sense the presence of water ahead from quite a distance, and when this happened, they had to be handled with the greatest care, or disaster resulted. When the lead cattle smelled water, they stretched their necks and started a continuous bawling, walking faster and faster.

If they started to run, there was danger that the rush to water would become a stampede, and that as the lead animals stopped to drink, the following body of cattle would pour upon the front cattle, crushing some into the mud, forcing others into the current to drown, jamming others into a bed of quicksand. If the craze for water led to a stampede, the animals might spread up and down the river for miles, so that it took many hours of hard riding to round them up. Or again, if a hot and thirsty herd smelled water and started to run, and an attempt was made to check them, they were apt to go milling around and around, the close-packed mass adding to their heat and thirst in this way until they became nearly crazy; and when they finally reached the river in this over-heated condition, the cold water was likely to be injurious to them.

To properly water a thirsty herd was a real test for even the most experienced trail boss. He tried to have the herd strung out to a great length, to avoid massing and overcrowding when the water was reached. The lead cattle would be walking swiftly,

just short of running. When they reached the water, the animals liked to walk out for a way, then to drink deeply, and stand placidly for a while in the stream, soaking up the moisture. If the following animals did not push forward too fast, it was possible for a herd to spread out considerably at the water's edge, for the leaders to drink their fill and then to move across the river as other cattle came up behind them. The men worked to keep the line of cattle from moving too far down the river with the current, and to keep the animals drinking and moving, slowly but surely. Animals which had been very thirsty were apt to want to simply stand knee deep in the mud at the water's edge until they became so bogged down that they could not move, but had to be pulled out with ropes.

The greatest water hazard of the drive was the flooded river. Only those drives which occurred in the late summer escaped this difficulty. At other times, it was an expected danger, and one to be gotten through with resignation, and as little loss of cattle as possible. The cattle could be very stubborn about these phases of the trip. The same mob fear that resulted in the stampede would sometimes make them refuse to enter a stream, or worse still, change their minds in midstream.

The lead steers were the important ones. If they swam unhesitatingly across the river, the rest of the cattle were likely to do the same. Often, experienced trail bosses used the same two or three steers as leaders for several drives. They were too valuable to sell, when they could be relied upon to lead a herd across any river safely. Such dependable pilots could do more to get a herd across than could any number of cowboys.

THE POINT riders, those two or three cowboys who rode at the head of the herd all the way, played an important part in getting a herd into and across a flooded stream. The lead cattle instinctively feared the rushing waters, but it was urgent that these lead steers should not hesitate, thus confusing the following cattle, and so the point riders urged them on, often plunging into the stream with the lead steers, to get them swimming. Once at swimming depth, the head cattle usually kept going to the farther bank, with the remainder of the herd following them across.

Usually they kept going, but not always. One of the worst things that could happen in the entire trail drive was for a herd to become terrified and start milling midstream of a flooded river. Milling was desirable in a land stampede, and was caused in the herds by the hands in order to ease the panic and stop the rush of the cattle. But milling in a raging torrent of deep water was an entirely different matter.

Anything might cause the leaders to become alarmed and hesitate enough for the milling to begin. A piece of driftwood, a sudden increase in the swiftness of the

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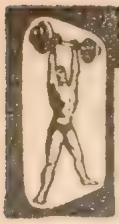

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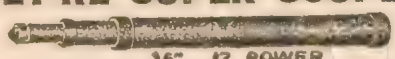

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current, an unexpected sand bar. The cattle would attempt to turn back, or bolt panic-stricken to right or left. Soon, instead of a smooth flowing of swimming cattle from one side of the river to the other, the stream would be filled with a mass of confused, struggling, terrified animals. Those cattle in the center were pushed under and drowned as the mass of cattle behind still tried to rush forward.

When a mill started, the trail drivers had to work fast, to save a terrific loss of life among the animals. The oncoming cattle had to be checked from entering the river, else the milling circle would become tighter and tighter. And somehow or other, the center had to be broken into.

It would seem an impossible thing for a rider to force his horse into the midst of such a mass of terrified cattle, but there was always some cowboy ready to try it, and usually to succeed. The story is told of one youngster who volunteered to break up a mill, and when his horse could go no further among the tossing horns, he walked across the massed backs of the steers to a big animal in the center, grasped the horns of the frightened beast, and rode him to the shore. The tight circle was thus broken, and the herd followed.

The possibilities of trouble in these crossings were innumerable. Sometimes the lead animals would start across a flood, then suddenly turn back, and in the midst of terrible confusion, return to the shore; then there was no use trying to persuade them to cross until the waters had subsided, and the whole outfit would have to sit there and wait for several days, or weeks.

Once, a herd got to a sandbar half way across a wide river, then refused to go further, either ahead or back. For many hours, they stood in the shallow, icy water, while the trail hands worried. Finally, the drivers were able to cut out half a dozen of the lead steers and get them to swimming again, and the whole herd followed them to shore.

Cattle especially hated to enter a river when it was so wide that they could not plainly see the opposite bank, but they were also apt to object to entering a creek only twenty feet wide, if the banks were steep and the current deep and swift.

The cowboys could not breathe sighs of relief over a crossing until it was actually accomplished and all their charges were on dry land once more. It has happened that a herd has safely crossed the worst part of a river, only to have the banks give way as the hordes of animals started to climb it. Thrown back into the water, the lead steers want to have nothing more to do with that side of the river, but only to go back where they came from. In the mill that follows, with most of the herd in the river, the cowboys can only hope that too many of the cattle will not perish before they can get them headed back to the bank they started from. Then they might just as well drive them down the river a way before attempting the crossing once more, in a new spot.

THE WILD ONES

★ By Roy Chester ★

GATHERING together a herd of wild longhorns was hazardous and difficult, and a challenge to the best skills of the cowboys. In the days when cattle were being driven out of Texas, destined for the eastern markets or the northern ranges, most of the Texas longhorns were in a totally wild state. They had never been herded, and many of them had never seen a man on horseback. To get these creatures together into a herd, was as hard a task as was the job of keeping them together and moving in the right direction on the long trail north.

The wild longhorn cattle were wily and cunning, strong and fiery tempered, from their years of freedom. They fought the cowboys all the way, and it required the utmost in vigilance and ingenuity to capture them and to control them.

Where the country was covered with brush, the wild cattle knew all the thickest clumps, and how to stay quiet in these hiding places when they sensed an enemy around. They ordinarily stayed hidden in the brush in the daytime, coming out on the small prairies to graze at night. Therefore, the work of gathering them was done very early in the morning, as soon as it was possible to see at all, or else on moonlight nights. And winter was the best season of the year to run the wild cattle. Since the leaves were shed, the men could see more plainly through the brush, and also both cattle and horses could better stand the hard running.

Suppose a number of cowboys are ready to begin the exciting job of bringing in as many wild longhorns as possible. The outfit rides out into the brush country where they hope to find a good number of cattle. With them goes a decoy herd. These are comparatively gentle steers, tamed at least to the extent of not bolting at the sight of a man on horseback, which can be driven as a herd. They camp for the night.

A couple of hours before the first light of dawn, they are up and breakfasting, and are soon ready to begin work. All except those in charge of the decoy herd ride out to some patch of open ground bordering the brush. They hope to find the wild ones grazing there, or that some will cross it on their way back to the brush from water. For at the first hint of daylight, the cattle will disappear into the brush, where it will be almost impossible to spot them.

The men wait motionless, and in silence. No one smokes, or speaks above a whisper. They have stationed themselves so that the wind will not carry their scent to their quarry. At last, someone spots the wild cattle. The animals do not run in large lots, and it is hard to see how many

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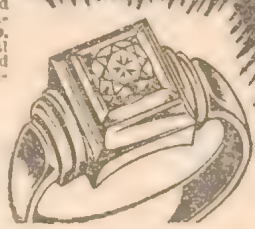

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there are. Perhaps an old timer among the cattle sees them first, and bolts for the brush, followed by the rest.

At once, the cowboys let loose a piercing, nerve-releasing yell, and they are off, ropes ready for the throw. Each man spots a cow for himself and follows it, dodging the others, until he manages to rope it. Sometimes brush cattle have raced ten or more miles until finally caught, and still have plenty of fight left.

At this point, anything can happen. One of these creatures at the end of a rope taxes the greatest powers of horse and rider. Given the least opportunity, the animal charges man and horse, secure in the power of its long sharp horns strong enough to gore an elephant. It is the man's job to do his roping and tying with speed and suddenness, if he wants to live to tell the tale. Excitement, danger, a thrill a minute—what could compare with the dawn chase of the wild ones of the Texas brush?

Sometimes, the chase leads directly through the dense thickets. The cowboy, on the tail of the animal he intends to get, hits the brush hard, and counts scratches and bruises and thorn-raked injuries later, after he has roped and tied his cow.

When each man has his animal secured, the decoy herd finds its use. It is driven in turn to each of the tied-down animals. The cowboy then warily unties his catch, and as speedily as possible departs. The wild cow ducks into the herd, and usually stays there, feeling perhaps that there is more safety in numbers of its kind, than trying to dodge back to the brush past his enemies, the watchful men on horses.

There was an easier, or rather a calmer, way of using the decoy herd. It would be driven into a thicket. By hard riding, a number of the wild cattle would be driven in the same direction, and then the cowboys would surround the place in a large circle. The men would go into slow motion, then, and start singing that peculiar lulling rythmn that cowboys use to sooth cattle. The decoy herd would mill about and the wild ones would become thoroughly mixed in the herd.

At this stage, the outcome of the whole thing was a gamble. Some sudden noise or movement, some nervous cowboy getting too anxious, might set off the whole bunch, and all the decoy herd might be lost as well as the wild cattle, save those which could be roped in the mad scramble. If things went as hoped, however, the cowboys continued circlin , and singing for some time, perhaps an hour or so, then carefully closed in on the cattle, driving them ahead as a single herd. Eventually they were driven into a corral, the wild ones going along with the others.

The wild longhorns were anything but dumb brutes, and the cowboys had to pit their greatest resources of skill, strength and courage against the daring, persistent and fierce efforts of these creatures who valued their freedom and meant to keep it.

Stories are told of individual wild cattle which never gave in, but fought without ceasing the rope, the corral, or whatever interfered with their freedom, until they dropped dead. The cowboys tried many methods of taking the fight out of these stubborn ones. The eyelids of the animals were sewed so that they could not see, and they would have to follow other cattle blindly. Horns were cut off; heads were tied to front legs; tails were tied to hind legs; animals were tied so that they could not move and left that way for a day or more; anything to break their spirit and teach the animals to fear the men who would be their masters.

The cattle were tough, and so the men had to be tougher. The picture of the carefree, happy cowboy riding across the plains is but a small part of the story. The cowboys who coped with the wild cattle of the Texas brush had one of the hardest, most dangerous jobs on earth. They had to be alert, well-trained, cool-headed, fearless. No wonder the Texas breed of cowboy founded a tradition, and became a legend throughout the West, even as the longhorn breed, tamed to the trail, spread across the entire West.

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★ **By R. Gaylord** ★

IT IS NOT generally realized that many cowboys were accustomed to make the Chicago or Kansas City runs with cattle trains quite often. After a herd of cattle had been delivered to a railhead and loaded aboard the cattle cars, it was common for a couple of riders to make the trip with them, riding in the caboose and seeing that the animals were cared for until they were turned over to the agent in Chicago or Kansas City.

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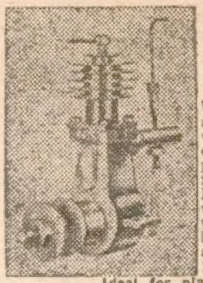

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The cattle would be retreating in droves before the crawling flames. A few of the largest animals would be killed, and the carcasses split to make the largest possible flat, moist expanse of surface. Two by two, the cowboys fastened ropes to the hind legs of a dead animal, and rode down the line of the blaze, dragging the wet carcass between their horses. One cowboy rode on the burned side, the other in the smoke on the other side of the fire.

When one carcass had been worn and singed to uselessness, another animal was killed and used in the same way. Other cowboys followed this first line of attack with wet saddle blankets, if any water was available in which to soak them; otherwise, with pieces of wet cow-hide hastily skinned from newly killed animals. With these, they beat out the spots of flame which had survived the dragging process.

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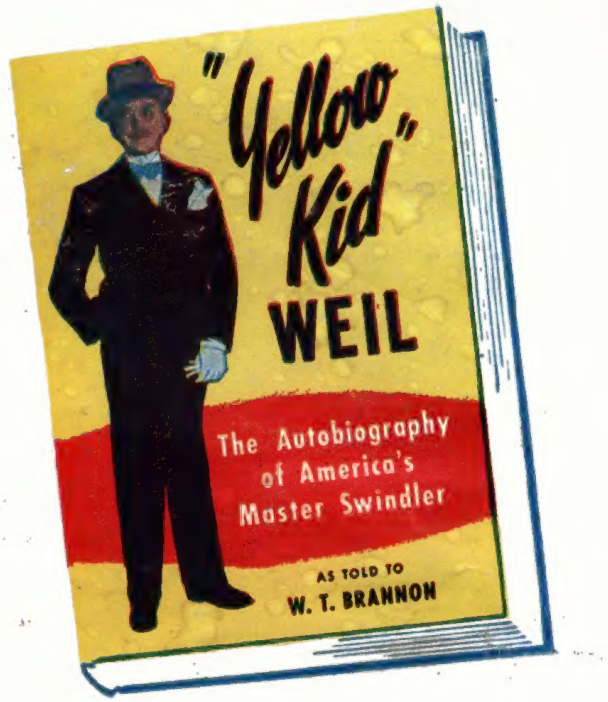

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